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Organizing for Freedom: The Angola Special Civics Project, 1987-1992

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Organizing for Freedom: The Angola Special Civics Project, 1987-1992

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science
in
Urban Studies

by

Lydia Pelot-Hobbs

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Abstract

During the 1980s and 1990s, the US prison system was expanding at an unprecedented rate. This research charts how prisoners at the nation's largest maximum-security prison, the Louisiana State Penitentiary, commonly referred to as Angola, founded the Angola Special Civics Project to collectively organize for prison reform. Using a combination of oral history and archival research, this thesis argues that the Angola Special Civics Project emerged during an era of political opportunity created by the coupling of political openings and contractions. Unlike outside advocates who focused their reform efforts on internal conditions, the Angola Special Civics Project centering of prisoners' experiential knowledge led them to organize for an end to life sentencing through a combination of research, political education, electoral organizing, and coalition building. This thesis further asserts that their organizing should be conceptualized as a form of prison abolitionist reforms.

Keywords: Louisiana State Penitentiary--Angola, social movements, prison reform, prison abolition

Epigraph

“Everybody dreams of something. Some dream of luxury. Some dream of their loved ones. But freedom is a convict’s dream...”

~Felton Blackwell #75844 Oak 2, 1985

Freedom

*Confined by prison walls, made of stone,
The need for freedom, has entered my bones,
grown men don't cry, and aren't suppose to tell
but living without freedom, is living pure hell,
what I wouldn't give to see the faces, I used to see a lot
and to find a way, to make this madness stop,
now I am paying, for the game lost,
I took it all for granted, it never crossed my mind,
that I'd lose my freedom, and be confined,
I never knew exactly, what freedom meant,
until I started working from sun-up to sun-set, with my back bent,
slaving for wages, that I'd never see,
having people constantly manipulating, and exploiting me,
if given the time, these things will pass I'm sure,
but without freedom, how long can I endure,
this is something I've learned, to it there is no doubt
freedom is what living is all about
I'd be overcome with joy, if I could only find
the keys to turn back the hand of time,
freedom seems distant, and so far away,
if with freedom, I could establish a reunion day,
I know that I can cope, with the struggles and the strife,
if freedom would only, re-enter my life.*

~Donald Craft #94266 Camp C, 1987

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

On the banks of the Mississippi River near the Louisiana-Mississippi border sits the penal plantation Angola. Unknown numbers of slaves captured from Western Africa worked this 18,000-acre plantation throughout the early years of Louisiana's history. Following emancipation, generations of unfree (mostly) Black men worked under the state's newly created convict-leasing system at Angola. After the state's politicians recognized the enormous profit to be made by continuing to work Black bodies in the growing of cotton and other crops, the state purchased the plantation, turning it into the Louisiana State Penitentiary in 1901.¹ Over a century later, the prison, still referred to as Angola, has become the largest maximum-security prison in the nation housing over 5,000 men.² Having earned the status as the "bloodiest prison in America" multiple times, Angola has continually operated in a series of crises since its inception.

In her book *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California* activist-scholar Ruth Gilmore, outlines that crisis is the result of social formations unable to be reproduced by existing social relations and structures. This instability is neither inherently positive nor negative but can only be fixed through the struggle of systematic change. Such systematic changes can take innumerable forms from the implementation of an authoritarian state by government actors to grassroots organizers pressuring for a new political-economic order.³ I argue that the prison industrial complex, as outlined in Chapter Two, constitutes a system continually in the crisis of attempting to buttress capitalist development and white supremacy. This ongoing crisis becomes visible by manifesting at multiple points such as

¹ Mark T. Carleton, *Politics and Punishment; the History of the Louisiana State Penal System* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 92.

² Jordan Flaherty, "Organizing for Freedom," Counterpunch, June 10, 2008, section goes here, accessed April 20, 2011, <http://www.counterpunch.org/flaherty06102008.html>.

³ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 26-54.

state interventions, conflicts between and among state actors and private interests, and internal strife of prison populations. For centuries, Angola has served as a symbolic and material space onto which these crises emerge and are challenged.

Despite Angola's notoriety, surprisingly little scholarly work has been written about any aspect of the institution.⁴ Especially for Louisiana, a state known for a preoccupation with its local history, it is somewhat astonishing that research has been sparse even on events that drew headlines in the *New York Times* and inspired motion pictures. But even beyond the headlines, there are stories to be told of this infamous space and the thousands of individuals who have been imprisoned there. In his recently published memoir, formerly incarcerated Wilbert Rideau writes that Angola

was a world fraught with cruelty and danger but alive with hope, aspiration, and wide-ranging activity. There was certainly human wreckage—tortured souls and destroyed lives. But people also labored and fought to create meaningful lives in an abnormal place, and to find purpose and a measure of satisfaction in a human wasteland.⁵

One group of men not only sought to make their lives meaningful inside Angola, but fought for a collective freedom from the prison altogether. During the 1980s, incarcerated activists formed the Angola Special Civics Project to organize for structural prison reform. Their organizing worked to highlight the injustices of the Louisiana penal system and to broaden prisoners' opportunities for release.

Although the work of the Angola Special Civics Project, also referred to as the "Civics Project," demonstrated a new ideology and strategies that departed from earlier generations of

⁴ Jessica Adams, "The Wildest Show in the South!: Tourism and Incarceration at Angola," *The Drama Review* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 94-108; Mark T. Carleton, *Politics and Punishment; the History of the Louisiana State Penal System* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971); Melissa Schrift, "The Angola Prison Rodeo: Inmate Coboy and Institutional Tourism," *Ethnology* 43, no. 4 (Autumn 2004): 331-44; Melissa Schrift, "Angola Prison Art: Captivity, Creativity, and Consumerism," *Journal of American Folklore* 119, no. 473 (Summer 2006): 257-274.

⁵ Wilbert Rideau, *In the Place of Justice: a Story of Punishment and Deliverance* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 88.

incarcerated activists, the project operated within a longer history of prisoners contesting the dehumanization of the institution. At the turn of the twentieth century, protests against the treatment of prisoners under Angola's convict-leasing system led to reformers calling for Angola to operate under state control rather than as a private entity believing better conditions would ensue.⁶ During the early 1950s, 37 prisoners slashed their Achilles' heels to call attention to the harsh working conditions on the plantation. Their self-mutilation gained extensive media coverage putting the spotlight on the prison's policies and practices. In response, Louisiana lawmakers began investigating the operations of the prison and instituting penal reforms ranging from abolishing the convict-guard system, funding building repairs, and opening a new correction facility for first offenders.⁷ While resistance to the prison had precedents at Angola, the work of the Angola Special Civics Project was a shift from an earlier era of activism that focused on conditions inside to a new framework centered on finding avenues out of the prison all together.

In this thesis, I argue that the history of the Angola Special Civics Project is a key site for studying a modern struggle for racial justice. In Michel Foucault's seminal work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Modern Prison*, he contends that the shift in Europe from public torture to private incarceration "did not re-establish justice – it reactivated power."⁸ Rather than viewing this change in punishment as a transformation of power hierarchies, Foucault writes that it should be understood as a new formulation of the same structures. Similarly, Angela Davis argues that racism did not disappear following the Civil Rights movement, but rather reconstructed itself in less explicit forms through societal institutions and structures, particularly

⁶ Carleton, 47.

⁷ Carleton, 150-166

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 49.

through the criminal justice system.⁹ Although neither Angola nor the Angola Special Civics Project has ever been entirely Black or people of color, the Louisiana prison system has always disproportionately incarcerated Black people, with eighty percent of Angola's population of African descent for much of its history.¹⁰ Hence, we should conceptualize the struggle of prisoners at Angola for freedom as a piece of a much broader legacy of Black Southerners striving for freedom, for the rights of full citizenship.

Since slavery, Black people have contested the ideologies and practices of racial oppression while also imagining the possibilities of racial justice. Throughout this struggle for racial justice the South has served as both a site of some of the most intense racial repression and the most visionary politics of what a world without white supremacy could be. During enslavement, unknown numbers of slaves revolted against their masters, challenging notions that they were subhuman and undeserving of freedom.¹¹ Leading up to Reconstruction, Black Southern activists sought to transform the political structures they had lived under, pushing for Black suffrage, a project at the time derided by many white abolitionists.¹² Following Reconstruction's demise, Black Creole activist Homer Plessey of New Orleans protested the newly emerging Jim Crow laws of the railroads.¹³ Then, during the twentieth century, Southern Blacks organized the Black Freedom Movement, one of the largest movements in US history. Struggling not only for their citizenship rights but for a transformation of racial hierarchies,

⁹ Angela Y. Davis, "Race and Criminalization: Black Americans and the Punishment Industry," in *The Angela Davis Y. Reader*, ed. Joy James (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 66.

¹⁰ Carleton, 88.

¹¹ Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

¹² Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cosse Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans 1850-1900," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 225.

¹³ Logsdon and Bell, 257-258.

activists utilized a combination of legal, electoral and direct action strategies.¹⁴ Additionally, collective organizations such as the Student Non-Violent Coordination Committee (SNCC) built their organizing out of a philosophy that “emphasized the importance of tapping oppressed communities for their own knowledge, strength, and leadership in constructing models for social change.”¹⁵ This belief guided their work and pressed them to envision what a transformed society could be.

However, most narratives of Black Southern organizing for racial justice end with the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., and/or the rise of Black Power.¹⁶ It begs the question: what happened to the Southern goals of Black Freedom after the 1960s? With the dismantling of Jim Crow, a massive victory was won, but no Black Freedom Movement scholar contends the struggle was over. I argue that attention to the rise of the prison industrial complex offers a possible framework for understanding both the shifting structures of racism and white supremacy into the 1970s, and the corresponding new modes of resistance developed towards achieving Black freedom.

Furthermore, since incarceration in the United States has increased over tenfold since the 1980s, there has been renewed energy by activists to organize against the US prison system. Many antiprison activists have developed a politicized understanding of the penal system that identifies it as an apparatus of state violence. Yet, antiprison activists have been confronted by the conundrum that so often the reforms they have won have been utilized to further expand the

¹⁴ Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality 1954-1992* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Kim Lacy Rogers, *Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement*, (New York: New York University Press, 1993); and Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

¹⁵ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 362.

¹⁶ Indeed, Harvard Sitkoff's *The Struggle for Black Equality* manages to do all three.

prison system.¹⁷ This reality has led to the emergence of prison abolition as a strand of antiprison activism, a political movement that seeks to eradicate the entire prison industrial complex and directly connects its work to the legacy of 19th century activists who sought to abolish slavery. Members of the contemporary prison abolitionist organization Critical Resistance have articulated the necessity of understanding crime as the result of inequitable social structures rather than personal pathology. Prison abolitionists have argued for a three pronged process that includes: working towards shrinking the prison industrial complex through sentencing reforms and deincarceration strategies, organizing for solutions to the social and economic problems that funnels individuals and communities into the prison system, and building alternatives to incarceration rooted in systems of accountability, rather than punishment. Abolition should be seen as both a strategy *and* a goal.¹⁸

Still, this does not mean to abandon the work for prison reforms that make concrete improvements in the lives of incarcerated people. Rather, antiprison activists are faced with the question: how do antiprison activists continue to work for reforms in ways that center abolition as a goal rather than reform being an end in itself? Or, in other words, how do antiprison activists organize reforms that weaken rather than strengthen the prison industrial complex?

Towards developing answers to these complex questions, I argue the necessity of studying the varied forms of resistance to the contemporary prison system in order to identify the lessons and challenges that can contribute to current organizing. Although Louisiana claims the title for having the highest incarceration rate in the country, there has been little research into the

¹⁷ Cassandra Shaylor and Cynthia Chandler, “Reform and Abolition: Points of Tension and Connection”, Political Resource Associates, *Defending Justice: An Activist Resource Kit*, accessed June 28, 2011, http://www.defendingjustice.org/organizing/shaylor_reform.html.

¹⁸ Critical Resistance, ed., *Abolition Now!: Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle Against the Prison Industrial Complex* (Oakland (CA): AK Press, 2008), xii.

rich and textured history of antiprison organizing in Louisiana.¹⁹ By understanding how incarcerated men at the largest maximum security prison in the nation, in a state with the highest incarceration rate in the world collectively organized themselves and built coalitions for prison reform is crucial for today's movements seeking alternatives in the face of entrenched right-wing politics. Even though the leaders and members of the Angola Special Civics Project did not identify as prison abolitionists, I argue that their focus on ending life without parole sentencing offers a possible avenue for "abolitionist reforms."

In this thesis, I contend that the successes of the Angola Special Civics Project lay in its ability to collectively organize around structural reforms in coalition with outside allies who were accountable to prisoner leadership. Chapter Two of my thesis traces how the literatures on the context of the politics of mass incarceration, the strategies and limitation of antiprison organizing, and social movement theory provide frameworks for evaluating the Angola Special Civics Project. In my third chapter, I outline my methodology and methods for researching this project. My fourth and fifth chapters tell the story of the Angola Special Civics Project. Chapter Four asserts that during the 1980s prisoners were confronted with the rise of law and order politics across Louisiana. This political contraction combined with the political opening of an era of reformist corrections officials created an environment conducive to prisoner organizing. These events propelled prisoners to move from individually working for release to collectivizing their struggle for freedom in the formation of the Angola Special Civics Project. Chapter Five traces the rise and decline of the Angola Special Civics Project. I argue that incarcerated activists developed political strategy around their experiential knowledge of incarceration that included

¹⁹ Tim Morris, "Louisiana's Incarceration Rate Is No. 1 in Nation," *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), March 2, 2009, accessed April 20, 2011, http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2009/03/louisianas_incarceration_rate.html. According to the data, as of 2007 one in fifty-five people in Louisiana were in prison or jail.

coalition building, electoral campaign, and drafting state legislation. During its height, the Civics Project was able to draft and pass new parole legislation and publicize the issue of prison reform across the state. Finally, I conclude by examining the lessons the Angola Special Civics Project has for today's antiprison activists and the ongoing impact of the Civics Project's work.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In this thesis, I offer a documentation and framework for understanding prisoner-led organizing for change at Angola. During the 1980s and 1990s, incarcerated activists at Angola formed the Angola Special Civics Project to organize themselves and their allies for an end to life without parole sentencing in the era of the rise of prison-industrial complex. Currently there is a lack of research about Angola as an institution and about prison reform efforts in Louisiana. My thesis seeks to begin to fill in this gap while also contributing to several academic literatures. I situate the organizing for freedom at Angola within critical prison studies literature on the politics of mass incarceration, the growing literature on antiprison activism, and social movement theories. While these literatures include overlapping and complementary concepts and political implications, they have yet to be considered together in framing incarcerated peoples' struggles.

Politics of Mass Incarceration

In the last few decades, there has been a proliferation of critical studies of the United States prison system. Traversing a wide range of academic fields of inquiry including history, sociology, anthropology, geography, ethnic studies, and cultural studies, critical prison scholars have departed from traditional criminology by shifting the question of why do “criminals” exist to why do prisons exist. Through this reframing, critical prison scholars have illuminated the relationship of the modern U.S. prison system to Black enslavement, and the restructuring of local and global economies under advanced capitalism and U.S. imperialism.²⁰

²⁰ On the relationship of prisons to Black enslavement see Angela Y. Davis, "From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison: Frederick Douglass and the Convict Lease System," in *The Angela Davis Y. Reader*, ed. Joy James (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 74-95; Angela Y. Davis, "Racialized Punishment and Prison Abolition," in *The Angela Davis Y. Reader*, ed. Joy James (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 96-107; Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories

This research has argued that the expansion of the prison-industrial complex has been a strategy to respond to political and economic crises. Social theorist Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* traces how the creation of the modern prison has been a project of social order and control.²¹ In particular, Foucault notes that 18th century Europeans developed the modern prison system in tandem with capitalist development. Within the new capitalist epoch, the recently created bourgeois class constructed a legal system based on private property to maintain their individual rights and power over the working-class. By asserting their right to property and capital, the bourgeoisie created new crimes that targeted and criminalized the peasantry for long-standing practices such as collective ownership of land.²² Imprisonment allowed the bourgeoisie to avoid large-scale confrontation over this new economic system.

While Foucault focused on the prison's role in upholding class hierarchies, numerous scholars have pointed to the racialized structures of the prison system in the context of the United States. Angela Davis has argued that the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, which states that slavery is unconstitutional "except as punishment for a crime," effectively allowed for the continued enslavement of Black Americans under the auspices of the criminal justice

Press, 2003); Gilmore, Kim. "Slavery and Prison - Understanding the Connections." *Social Justice* 27, no. 3 (2000): 195-205; David M. Oshinsky, *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1996); and Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). On the relationship of prisons to advanced capitalism see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Tara Herivel and Paul Wright, eds., *Prison Nation: the Warehousing of America's Poor* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America* (London: Verso, 2008) and Julia Sudbury, ed., *Global Lockdown: Race, Gender, and the Prison-Industrial Complex* (New York: Routledge, 2005). On the relationship of prisons to U.S. imperialism see Laura Evans, "Playing Global Cop: US Militarism and the Prison-Industrial Complex," in *Global Lockdown: Race, Gender, and the Prison-Industrial Complex* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 215-230; Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); and Julia Sudbury, ed., *Global Lockdown: Race, Gender, and the Prison-Industrial Complex* (New York: Routledge, 2005);

²¹ Foucault, 24.

²² Foucault, 84-87

system.²³ Kim Gilmore further writes that after emancipation, Southern whites crafted Black Codes that explicitly targeted newly freed Blacks through vagrancy and loitering laws as a strategy to reassert white supremacist power following Reconstruction. Prison populations quickly grew during this period, and white politicians and elites used this as an opportunity to equate Blackness with criminality.²⁴ Moreover, historian David M. Oshinsky documents that in post- Civil War Mississippi, the penal system was transformed into a white supremacist and economically profitable venture. In Southern states, Black bodies were once again utilized for profit by creating the convict-leasing system where the state would pay businessmen to shelter and feed prisoners while they would work them in their plantation fields for a profit.²⁵ When convict-leasing was outlawed at the turn of the 20th century, the Mississippi legislature approved the Parchman State Penitentiary, which was the first plantation prison where the 90% Black prison population labored for state profit.²⁶ Through this new system, the white power structure found another way to expand the penal system for its political and economic benefit.

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the beginning of new political upheaval across the United States. Black Freedom activists successfully dismantled Jim Crow after decades of entrenchment. However as scholars Michelle Alexander and Loic Wacquant argue, the racial subjugation of Blacks did not disappear but was reshaped into a new system.²⁷

In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* Alexander states,

a new race-neutral language was developed for appealing to old racist sentiments, a language accompanied by a political movement that succeeded in putting the

²³ Angela Y. Davis, "From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison: Frederick Douglass and the Convict Lease System," 75.

²⁴ Kim Gilmore, 197-198.

²⁵ Oshinsky, 35.

²⁶ Oshinsky, 137-155.

²⁷ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010), 39-43; Loic Wacquant, "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the 'Race Question' in the US," *New Left Review* 13 (2002): pg. 45-49.

vast majority of blacks back in their place. Proponents of racial hierarchy found they could install a new racial caste system without violating the law or new limits of acceptable political discourse, by demanding ‘law and order’ rather than ‘segregation forever.’²⁸

This new system has been termed the “prison-industrial complex” by scholar activists.²⁹ Once again, the US penal system was utilized to respond to a moment of newly attained Black freedom.

In *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* Christian Parenti writes that, indeed, starting in the late 1960s, first Nixon, followed by both liberal and conservative politicians, used racially coded messaging in their call for increased funding and power for policing and new “War on Drugs” legislation.³⁰ The effect of such legislation was the dramatic increase in the incarceration of working class people of color across every state in America.

In addition, as Black and Third World³¹ liberationists gained traction across the country, government officials sought new means to neutralize political opposition. According to Dylan Rodriguez, during the late 1960s and 1970s government officials were truly fearful of the loss of white supremacist power and the possibility of revolution. In response, the Federal Bureau of Investigation under J. Edgar Hoover created the Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) to quell revolutionary movements, especially Black revolutionaries.³² Davis further articulates that defining political acts as criminal had the broader effect of discrediting social movements for racial and economic justice as a whole.³³ By the early 1970s, the same racist strategies were

²⁸ Alexander, 40.

²⁹ Angela Davis, "Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex," *Colorlines*, September 10, 1998, http://www.colorlines.com/archives/1998/09/masked_racism_reflections_on_the_prison_industrial_complex.html.

³⁰ Parenti, 15-17.

³¹ My usage of the term “Third World” is to recognize the meaning behind activists of color conscious political choice to use the term from the late 1960s through the 1970s.

³² Rodriguez, 48-49.

³³ Angela Y. Davis, "Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation," in *The Angela Davis Y. Reader*, ed. Joy James (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 43.

employed by the FBI against Black and Third World revolutionaries and communities and by the criminal justice system against working-class communities of color in general.³⁴

While the neutralization of political radicals and potential radicals in communities of color was a clear goal of the U.S. government, the state utilized the prison system for other crises as well. In the case of California, geographer Ruth Gilmore asserts that the 1980s and 1990s expansion of the prison system was a “fix” to the surpluses of finance capital, land, labor, and state capacity created by the globalizing economy, immigration, drought, and conservative and neoliberal cuts to social services.³⁵ At the national level, Parenti argues that the 1980s and 1990s “tough on crime” movement was “about managing and containing the new surplus populations created by neoliberal economic policies.”³⁶ According to Parenti, politicians relied on the War on Drugs to blame communities of color for the economic recession of the 1980s to avoid the white working-class from calling into question the neoliberal agenda.³⁷ Former political prisoner Linda Evans further asserts that this tactic also kept poor communities of color and whites divided from building cross-racially against economic and social conditions.³⁸ This “solution” to surplus labor also drew on the historical legacies of white supremacy with communities of color even more disproportionately caught in the criminal justice system by the early 1990s.³⁹ Warehousing people became the catchall solution for the economic and political problems of the late 20th century.

³⁴ Rodriguez, 23.

³⁵ Gilmore, 57-84.

³⁶ Parenti, 45.

³⁷ Parenti, 55.

³⁸ Evans, 216.

³⁹ According to Davis, by 1994 Black people were 7.8% more likely to be incarcerated than whites with “32.2 percent of percent of young black men and 12.3 percent of young Latino men between the ages of twenty and twenty nine are either in prison, in jail, on probation or parole.” Angela Y. Davis, “Race and Criminalization: Black Americans and the Punishment Industry,” 64.

Strategies and Limitations of Prison Opposition

While the majority of critical prison scholars' work has emphasized the ideologies, structures, and purposes of the modern prison industrial complex, their research has always noted the ubiquity of resistance to the prison system since its formation.⁴⁰ Recently there has been increased attention to the study of grassroots organizing against prisons, often by scholars deeply rooted in prison reform/abolition movements.⁴¹ This literature has been crucial in articulating the ideologies, organizational formations, and strategies of historical and contemporary antiprison activism. Through reviewing the literature on antiprison activism, a number of recurring strategies, as well as, limitations emerge.

Research on antiprison organizing demonstrates the importance of individuals and groups in developing a political analysis of the prison system. David Oshinsky writes that interest in reforming Parchman Penitentiary came about due to SNCC and CORE activists experiencing the dehumanizing effects of the prison. Through their experience of incarceration and hearing the stories of prisoners, they became aware that prisons were another state institution serving the aims of racial subjugation of Blacks.⁴² Furthermore, Dylan Rodriguez, Liz Samuels, and Jamie Bissonette's writings illustrate that prison reform and abolitionist movements of the 1970s were directly influenced by Black liberationist articulations of the US prison as a cornerstone to white supremacy and capitalist exploitation.⁴³ At Walpole Correctional Institute, prisoners' recognition of the racialized structures of the prison led them to realize the role white supremacy played in dividing white and Black prisoners from one another. Therefore, they committed to cross-racial

⁴⁰ Foucault, op cit; Herivel and Wright, op cit; Oshinsky; op. cit; Parenti, op cit; Sudbury, op. cit.

⁴¹ Bissonette, op. cit; Gilmore, op. cit; Liz Samuels, "Improvising on Reality: The Roots of Prison Abolition," in *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism*, ed. Dan Berger (Rutgers University Press, 2010).

⁴² Oshinsky, 235-238.

⁴³ Bissonette, 25; Rodriguez, 52-65; Samuels, 21.

organizing as a necessary ideology and strategy of building a unified movement for freedom.⁴⁴ In the context of the mass prison expansion of the 1990s, Ruth Gilmore traces the importance of the Los Angeles based organization Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (Mothers ROC) in recognizing the patterns of incarceration. By sharing their personal experiences of navigating the criminal justice system, ROCers were able to develop a racial and class analysis that the California criminal justice system was targeting urban young men of color for incarceration.⁴⁵

Through developing a political analysis of the prison system, antiprison activists have been able to identify what structures to target in their specific organizing. Even as antiprison organizers have agreed on a general political analysis that conceptualizes the prison system as a project of white supremacy and capitalism, their specific contexts have led them to identify different structures as salient in their organizing. In the case of Parchman Penitentiary, a prison reform attorney identified the issue of conditions at Parchman in violation of “cruel and unusual punishment” and saw the courts as the only venue to rectify the situation.⁴⁶ On the other hand, imprisoned Black liberationists sought to challenge the myth of America as a meritocracy through their court cases in the 1970s. These Black imprisoned radicals strategically utilized the court system to highlight the political project of white supremacy with the goal of demonstrating how the prison system intentionally immobilized Black and Third World revolutionaries.⁴⁷ Prisoners at Walpole identified a different strategy for their activism, identifying with the framework employed by the National Prisoners Reform Association (NPRa) that prisoners were required to work while incarcerated yet had no protection under US labor law.⁴⁸ Prisoners founded a Walpole chapter of the NPRa with a multiracial leadership structure to push to be

⁴⁴ Bissonette, 27.

⁴⁵ Gilmore, 183-187.

⁴⁶ Oshinsky, 245-247.

⁴⁷ Rodriguez, 54.

⁴⁸ Bissonette, 25.

recognized by the prison administration as the official representative body of the prisoners while also going to the State Labor Relations Committee to be recognized as an official union with collective bargaining power. Activist prisoners believed this would be a vehicle to gain reforms that would build on the long-term goal of abolishing prisons.⁴⁹ Outside the prison walls, ROCers identified the “Three Strikes Law” as the key policy for increased incarceration rates in their communities. In response, a group of individuals from Mothers ROC founded the statewide organization Families to Amend California’s Three Strikes (FACTS) to best do campaign-based work on policy issues.⁵⁰ Across geography and time, antiprison activists have utilized their analysis of the prison system to identify clear targets for their organizing.

Another important strategy that emerges from the literature on opposition to prisons is the leadership role of communities and individuals most impacted by incarceration. While not all of the cases name the need for such leadership, a number of them highlight the importance of experiential knowledge in identifying the problems and potential solutions to the prison industrial complex. In the case of organizing for change at Walpole, prisoners’ leadership was crucial in the organizing strategy. The Walpole chapter of the NPRA working in coalition with outside prison allies organized into the Ad Hoc Committee on Prison Reform (AHC), which grounded itself in the idea that accountability to prisoners and ex-prisoners should guide the work.⁵¹ This was due to the concept that prisoners had unique knowledge because of their experiences of incarceration, and that if the goal was for prisoners to gain self-determination, the coalition should model this in their organizing. This structure proved fundamental during the two months the NPRA ran Walpole as AHC provided key support for prisoners’ leadership.⁵² Liz

⁴⁹ Bissonette, 86.

⁵⁰ Gilmore, 229-233.

⁵¹ Bissonette, 54.

⁵² Bissonette, 141-148.

Samuels' study of 1970s prison abolition movements further identifies that a politics of prisoner self-determination was widespread at this time.⁵³ Similarly, Gilmore highlights that only by ROCers having personal experiential knowledge of the tactics and strategies of the state in the hyper-incarceration of their loved ones were they able to identify clear campaigns for organizing. Moreover, their personal relationships to the issue contributed to their ability to successfully grow the organization through base-building.⁵⁴

However, various studies point to how a broader pool of allies and structures influence the possibilities and limitations of organizing. David Oshinsky, Jamie Bissonette, and Liz Samuels' research details the role that sympathetic officials have played in broadening the possibilities for changes to the prison. Oshinsky argues that at Parchman reforms were possible because of the appointment of the racially moderate William Keady as the federal district judge for northern Mississippi.⁵⁵ When a case was argued in front of Judge Keady on the conditions at Parchman, Keady seriously investigated the allegations and found in favor of the prisoners and mandates sweeping reforms of Parchman.⁵⁶ In Massachusetts, the governor Francis Sargent became aware of the need to reform the correctional system.⁵⁷ In response, he hired a new Commissioner of Corrections: John Boone. John Boone was a Black Southern corrections administrator trained in social work rather than law enforcement who believed in the necessity of a community corrections model that would allow prisoners greater self-determination in their correctional experience and hopefully allow for prison depopulation.⁵⁸ While Boone's power was limited, in his position he attempted to support the organizing efforts of the NPRA and AHC to

⁵³ Samuels, 22.

⁵⁴ Gilmore, 181-187.

⁵⁵ Oshinsky 240-241

⁵⁶ Oshinsky, 247.

⁵⁷ Bissonette, 24.

⁵⁸ Bissonette, 41-50.

the best of his ability during his time as Commissioner, giving them at moments more political sway that they would have otherwise. Samuels asserts that while during the 1970s prisoner organizations were able to make strategic use of concerned officials, this became more difficult as law and order politics made fewer and fewer officials sympathetic to prison reform.⁵⁹

Indeed, the reality is that after Boone was pushed out of his position for his progressive politics the Massachusetts Correctional system returned to previous incarceration ideologies and procedures, exemplifying the staying power of the prison system.⁶⁰ Similarly, Oshinsky ends *Worse than Slavery* stating that while the prison did undergo reforms in the decades following the 1970s, Parchman's prison population tripled in response to "tough on crime" legislation.⁶¹ These stories point to the limitation of prison reforms in decreasing incarceration in the United States. In particular, this case study supports Foucault's assertion that prison reform efforts always had the unintended consequences of strengthening the prison itself.⁶²

This conundrum of prison reform efforts as inadvertent contributions to the prison industrial complex has led to a major tension in prison reform organizing. Samuels writes that as the 1970s progressed, antiprison activists confronted the disappointment that their reforms were often co-opted by the state and the rising rate of incarceration over time. In response, activists inside and outside of prison walls began calling for prison abolition. Prison abolitionists asserted that prison was a system designed to control and exert systematic violence over communities of color and working class people. A central ideology of prison abolition was that crime was the response to broader social problems produced by the state, such as poverty, racism, and sexism.

⁵⁹ Samuels, 33.

⁶⁰ Bissonette, 210. Indeed, Bissonette writes that Boone himself became more radicalized on the issue of penal reform based in his experiences at Walpole concluding the only real solution was the complete abolition of prisons.

⁶¹ Oshinsky, 251.

⁶² Foucault, 234.

Therefore, people needed to focus on the root causes rather than locking people away. Hence, during the 1970s prison abolitionists strove for a series of deincarceration strategies, also framed as “abolitionist reforms.” These included ending indeterminate sentencing, shorter sentences, community restitution programs, the decriminalization of drugs and sex work, and alternative sentencing. However, not all antiprison activists accepted the strategy of prison abolition. While some activists did not see abolition as a viable goal, others disagreed with the objective altogether.⁶³ As the prison population further boomed over the last several decades, the question of abolition or reform continued to be a pertinent question for antiprison activists’ consideration.

Social Movement Theory

While the emerging literature on antiprison activism has illustrated the strategies, limitations, and tensions of resistance of the prison industrial complex, this research has yet to be informed by social movement theories. The theoretical literature on social movements has sought to explicate the origins and outcomes of collective movements. In the last several decades, the field has been heavily informed by “political process” or “political opportunity” theory. Focusing on how structures and events create openings and closing for movements, this framework has been widely utilized across the social sciences. However, a review of the literature also shows there have been various critiques aimed at the theory. I contend that a combination of political process theory and some formulations crafted by its critics allow for a better understanding of the history of the Angola Special Civics Project.

Scholar Doug McAdam popularized the formulation of political process theory in his book *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*. Seeking to explicate the rise and decline of the Civil Rights Movement, Doug McAdam argues, “that the emergence of widespread protest activity is the result of a combination of expanding political

⁶³ Samuels, 27-31.

opportunities and indigenous organization.”⁶⁴ McAdam argues that although excluded peoples have the ability to successfully push for social change at any time, the particularly socio-historical context usually hinders collective action.⁶⁵ Thus, shifts in the environment can create opportunities for successful political mobilization. He writes, “any event or broad social process that serves to undermine the calculations and assumptions on which the political establishment is structured occasions a shift in political opportunities.”⁶⁶ According to McAdam such events can range from wars, economic crises, migration, or political realignments. These events can serve to undermine the stability of an entire political structure or increase political leverage to specific groups.⁶⁷ In the case of the Civil Rights Movement, McAdam identifies the Great Migration of Blacks to the urban North and World War II as two events in the first half of the 20th century that provided a political opportunity for large-scale movement.⁶⁸ These events in turn created what McAdam terms a “process of cognitive liberation.”⁶⁹ By this he means a mental shift where people begin to believe they can change their current circumstances. What is key here is people’s perception of possibility, regardless of what it may actually be. For example, McAdam asserts that while in hindsight it may be easy to critique the superficial support for Black rights during the New Deal era, the symbolism of government support for racial equality created a collective cognitive shift by Blacks that there was a possibility of an end to racial injustice.⁷⁰

The third component of McAdam’s political process thesis is the importance of pre-existing indigenous organizations or mobilizing structures. Even if a political opportunity occurs

⁶⁴ Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 2.

⁶⁵ McAdam, 39.

⁶⁶ McAdam, 41.

⁶⁷ McAdam, 42.

⁶⁸ McAdam, 105.

⁶⁹ McAdam, 50.

⁷⁰ McAdam, 108.

that transforms people's attitudes about possibilities of change, organizational structures are necessary to harness people's energy into movement building. Movement organizations create a space for individuals to build relationships with others, develop leaders, devise strategy, generate actions, channel resources, network people between organizations, and potentially foment new organizations.⁷¹ This was the case for Black Southerners looking for racial justice organizations following World War II. Explicitly political groups such as the NAACP as well as Black colleges and churches became sites for political mobilization and organization.⁷² Hence, together political opportunities, cognitive liberation, and mobilizing structures served as the framework for movement building.

For decades McAdam's formulation served as a formative text for social movement scholars seeking structural understanding of social movements. However, several theorists have pointed to the flaws of political process theory as originally conceived to develop a more nuanced and thorough understanding of social movements. Here I summarize three critiques of the framework: the lack of specification of what constitutes a political opportunity, the issue of structural bias, and the problem of relevancy to social movement activists.

Several scholars have pointed to the problem that the framework is too broad in its conception of political opportunities.⁷³ Scholars David S. Meyer and Debra C. Minkoff assert that the lack of consensus of what constitutes a political opportunity has led to the same terms being utilized to describe completely different factors. They write that for the framework to be

⁷¹ McAdam 43-48.

⁷² McAdam 87.

⁷³ Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, "Caught in a Winding, Snarling Vine: the Structural Bias of Political Process Theory," *Sociological Forum* 14, no. 1 (March 1999); James M. Jasper, "Social Movement Theory Today: Toward a Theory of Action?," *Sociology Compass* 4, no. 11 (November 2010); David S. Meyer and Debra C. Minkoff, "Conceptualizing Political Opportunity," *Social Forces* 82, no. 4 (June 2004). It should be noted that Doug McAdam's himself critiques his own work on several of the same grounds in his introduction to the second edition of *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*.

constructive there needs to be “more careful and more explicit conceptualization and specification of political opportunity variables and models, and for a broader and more nuanced understanding of the relationship among institutional politics, protest, and policy.”⁷⁴ Furthermore, while McAdam focuses his research primarily on how political openings can lead to political opportunities, other research has pointed to how political threats can also serve as a galvanizing force for movement organization. In their article, “Applying Qualitative Comparative Analysis to Empirical Studies of Social Movement Coalition Formation,” Holly J. McCammon and Nella Van Dyke argue that political threats such as the passage of new policy that threatens a group’s interests or rights while often can lead to political retrenchment it can also lead to mobilization. These threats can push groups to overcome pre-existing internal factions or lead to activists developing new strategies.⁷⁵ Other research has shown that such political contractions are particularly mobilizing when they are coupled with openings. These dialectical processes often allow for possibilities in the political landscape.⁷⁶

This general critique of the lack of specificity in political process theory is further bolstered by a second more focused critique of the framework’s structural bias. In their article, “Caught in a Winding, Snarling Vine: The Structural Bias of Political Process Theory,” sociologists Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper assert that the framework assumes that the political opportunities are stable structures rather than dynamic processes.⁷⁷ This focus on structures ignores the dynamic quality of macro-processes and leads to a deterministic understanding of social movements. They argue that political opportunities “do not result from

⁷⁴ Meyer and Minkoff, 1458.

⁷⁵ Holly J. McCammon and Nella Van Dyke, "Applying Qualitative Comparative Analysis to Empirical Studies of Social Movement Coalition Formation," *Social Movements, Protest, and Contention* 34 (2010): 296-297.

⁷⁶ Goodwin and Jasper, 38.

⁷⁷ Goodwin and Jasper, 36-37.

some invariant menu of factors, but from situationally specific combinations and sequences of political processes—none of which, in the abstract has determinate consequences.”⁷⁸ In addition, the narrow focus on social structures has led to the minimization of the strategic process individuals and collectives engage in to build movements.⁷⁹ Indeed, in recent years scholars have heeded this advice with the cultural turn in social movement studies. Social movement theorists have concentrated their attention to issues such as collective identities, affect, and micro-level interaction.⁸⁰ Sociologists David A. Snow, E. Burke Rochford Jr., Steven K. Worden, and Robert D. Benford have contributed to the cultural turn by identifying the role of “framing processes.” They articulated that people must go through a process of recognizing injustice in their life rather than accepting their problems as random misfortune. Participation in movements is contingent on their interpretation of society aligning with social movements. This “frame alignment” is a dynamic process that is continually negotiated as peoples’ conceptions of the world shift.⁸¹ Additionally, other scholars have posited that frames are most powerful when there is a strong connection between them and the structural context; when they resonate with people’s own lived experiences.⁸² Scholars’ attention to internal processes has contributed to new understandings of social movement participation.

Finally, even as scholars are actively researching and writing about social movements, Douglas Bevington and Chris Dixon contend that the largest problem confronting social movement theorists is that their work is not viewed as relevant by movement participants. They

⁷⁸ Goodwin and Jasper, 39.

⁷⁹ Goodwin and Jasper, 36.

⁸⁰ Jasper, 970-973.

⁸¹ David A. Snow et al., "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation," *American Sociological Review* 51 (August 1986): 466.

⁸² Rory McVeigh, Daniel J. Myers, and David Sikkink, "Corn, Klansman, and Coolidge: Structure and Framing in Social Movements," *Social Forces* 83, no. 2 (December 2004): 656.

argue for what they term “movement-relevant theory.”⁸³ Drawing on their own experience with North American social movements, they write that although activists are actively engaging themselves in theoretical conversations, the issues they are grappling with are not presented in the social movement literature. Political organizers already know about the need for networks, the importance of political opportunities, and relevant messaging.⁸⁴ Bevington and Dixon maintain that theory is useful to movements when it is “based on direct, dynamic engagement with the concerns and questions of movements themselves.”⁸⁵ This is not to say scholars should simply valorize movement organizations and campaigns, but that scholars should critically engagement movements in the goal of strengthening their strategies.⁸⁶

For this thesis, I will be situating the history of the Angola Special Civics Project within the structural framework of political process theory with increased attention to the dynamic strategies employed by incarcerated activists. Particularly, I will highlight the specific political opportunities—both openings and contractions—that arose during the 1980s and early 1990s and the ways in which incarcerated activists collectively organized for their freedom. Responding to Bevington and Dixon’s call for movement-relevant scholarship, I seek for this thesis to chart incarcerated activists’ analysis of the prison industrial complex and their organizing priorities that arose out of such understandings. By centering organizers own frameworks, I attempt for this thesis to be relevant to current activists.

Conclusion

While when taken separately there are rich academic literatures on the politics of mass incarceration, antiprison organizing, and social movements, there currently is no research that

⁸³ Douglas Bevington and Chris Dixon, "Movement-relevant Theory: Rethinking Social Movement Scholarship and Activism," *Social Movement Studies* 4, no. 3 (December 2005): 189.

⁸⁴ Bevington and Dixon, 190.

⁸⁵ Bevington and Dixon, 201.

⁸⁶ Bevington and Dixon, 191.

places these literatures in conversation with one another. In particular, there is a lack of research on the Southern prison system and/or activism surrounding it since the rise of mass incarceration in the 1970s and 1980s, despite the repeated analysis by scholars across disciplines that the modern penal system is a new formulation of Black enslavement and Jim Crow. My thesis is an attempt to fill that gap by focusing on the recent history the Angola Special Civics Project's reform work at Angola, during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The goal of this study is to document this overlooked example of antiprison activism utilizing social movement theory, but to also push critical prison studies to consider the operation of and instances of resistance to the prison system in the modern South. In addition, it is my hope that my research will contribute to activists' conversations and strategies regarding how to organize for abolitionist reforms.

CHAPTER 3: Methods and Methodology

Introduction

My research has utilized a combination of oral history interviews, archival research, and prison memoir in my work of piecing together the untold history of the Angola Special Civics Project's response to the beginnings of the Louisiana prison-industrial complex.⁸⁷ My choice of methods is informed both by pragmatic and political reasons. As an oral history project, the University of New Orleans IRB committee deemed my research exempt from full review.

Methods

Throughout my research process, I intentionally centered the words and experiences of incarcerated persons. As my research project is focused on the question of how prisoners contested the rise of the prison industrial complex in Louisiana, my methods are centered on the experiential knowledge of prisoners. This is not to say that I have excluded the voices and writings of free people. Indeed, to understand the solidarity organizing that occurred on the outside, it was necessary to interview outside allies. Further, focusing on mainstream media's discourses about incarceration was fundamental for my understanding of the political climate of Louisiana in the 1980s and 1990s. However, for understanding the immediate effects of mass incarceration on prisoners' lives and organizing projects founded and led by those inside Angola, I focused my attention on the interviews of formerly incarcerated people, the self-documentation of *The Angolite*, and prisoner memoir.

⁸⁷ Since the concept of the prison industrial complex post-dates the era studied by this thesis, the Civics Project did not formulate the prison as the prison industrial complex. The concept of the prison industrial complex was developed by activist-scholar Angela Davis in the 1990s and later utilized as an organizing framework by grassroots organizations such as Critical Resistance, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, and All of Us or None of Us. However the Civics Project's attention to the interrelatedness of longer life sentences, lack of parole eligibility, the building of new prisons instead of granting releases, the costs of incarceration to the state, and the racialized and classed structures of incarceration should be understood as precursors to the formulations of the prison industrial complex after the era in question of this thesis.

I interviewed seven individuals using semi-structured oral history interviews between December 2010 and March 2011. Four of my participants were former members of the Angola Special Civics Project, and the remaining three participants had worked in alliance with the Civics Project from the outside. Every one of my participants was Black. The formerly incarcerated individuals each had served between 18-27 years at Angola. Kenneth “Biggy” Johnston and Norris Henderson began their sentences in the 1970s while Checo Yancey and Eugene Dean began their sentences in the 1980s. Two of the formerly incarcerated people I interviewed were currently on parole. The participants who were involved in the Civics Project as outsider supporters included Ted Quant, a local New Orleans community activist; Naomi Farve,⁸⁸ who served as a state representative for District 101 from 1986-1999; and Shawntae Johnson of New Orleans whose brother was incarcerated at Angola.

Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours and all were audio recorded and transcribed, with the exception of one interview, which was only partially recorded. I conducted one interview over the phone, and the rest were conducted in person. I primarily identified individuals to be interviewed through my relationship with Norris Henderson, one of the founders of the Angola Special Civics Project and a current organizer for prison and police reform in New Orleans. I also identified potential participants through noting key figures from my archival research. In accord with protocol set forth by the Oral History Association, all participants are identified in interview transcripts and this thesis by their real name.⁸⁹

Furthermore, using the names of real people, organizations, and places was important as oral

⁸⁸ Naomi Farve requested that she be referred to her current name, not the name she went by during the early 1990s which was Naomi Warren-White.

⁸⁹ Oral History Association, "Principles and Best Practices," Oral History Association | Gathering and Preserving Historical Information through Recorded Interviews, October 2009, accessed March 31, 2011, <http://www.oralhistory.org/do-oral-history/principles-and-practices/>. All interviewees consented to being identified by name.

historians have asserted a central purpose of such research is to create archives for “social groups whose written history is either missing or distorted.”⁹⁰ Thus, my thesis is an opportunity to create an archive of the historical events of the Angola Special Civics Project and prison reform organizing in Louisiana, which has been largely absent in other historical archival materials.

In my interviews, I asked the interviewees several questions including: How did they get involved in prison reform? What were their personal and organizational goals and strategies? How did they personally participate? What groups were involved in the organizing projects? What events or people influenced how the general public and politicians were conceiving of incarceration in the 1980s and 1990s? What is the legacy of this moment of activism? I also asked specific follow-up questions tailored to each interview. My interviews were semi-structured for a variety of reasons. Through this method, I have been able to ask questions fundamental to my research while my participants had the space to influence the direction of the interview. Participants were able to discuss issues I had not previously identified, emphasize points I had not given as much attention to, and challenge assumptions of my research. This allowed for my research process to be dynamic and go in different directions than I had originally anticipated.

In addition to oral history, archival research was central to my project. My research relies heavily on the Angola prisoner news-magazine, *The Angolite*. For my research, I reviewed all issues of *The Angolite* published between 1978-1994. This publication is notable on several grounds. From 1975 until 1995, *The Angolite* operated as a free press. As discussed by former Angolite editor Wilbert Rideau in his memoir, *In the Place of Justice*, beginning in 1975 under

⁹⁰ Alessandra Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2006), 64.

the leadership of prison administrator C. Paul Phelps.⁹¹ *The Angolite* was an uncensored prison publication. Phelps believed that it was important for the incarcerated men at Angola to have a free press, and he guaranteed that *The Angolite* would have access to information necessary for their investigative journalism.⁹² This practice allowed for *The Angolite* to conduct in-depth investigations and news reporting on issues ranging from the effects of various national and state policies on Angola, different governors' approaches to clemency, sexual assault within Angola, the economics of prisons, and the activities of prison reform organizations. Their journalism won them several awards including The George Polk Award, the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award and several awards from the American Bar Association and the American Penal Press.⁹³ I supplemented the writings from *The Angolite* with archival material from local and national publications: the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, the Baton Rouge *Morning Advocate*, *The Louisiana Weekly*, *The Dallas Morning News*, and *The New York Times*.

My final source of research materials is prison memoir. The source of prison memoir informs my research by recounting not only the events inside Angola during the 1980s and 1990s, but also the shape of living within Angola, and the different political analysis of the Louisiana prison system gained from that experience. In particular, my thesis draws from Wilbert Rideau's memoir *In the Place of Justice: A Story of Punishment and Deliverance*, which traces Rideau's time inside Angola and his personal quest for freedom from his incarceration on death row in 1962 until his release in 2005. As well as Rideau's narrative, Robert Hillary King's memoir *From the Bottom of the Heap*, which, while less focused on the specific context of the Angola Special Civics Project, demonstrates another perspective on the political workings of Angola and

⁹¹ See Chapter Four for a discussion of how progressive administrators were appointed to Angola.

⁹² Rideau, *In the Place of Justice*, 112-113.

⁹³ Rideau, *In the Place of Justice*, 151-159.

the Louisiana criminal justice system. Prison memoir offers another form of prisoner writing that contributes to the telling the untold story of organizing at Angola.

Methodology

As noted by several critical prison scholars, the modern prison system has intentionally sited prisons outside the purview of the general populace.⁹⁴ Through locating prisons in isolated rural areas, the state intentionally facilitates a collective public forgetting of the very existence of those housed within prison walls. When public discussions on incarceration do occur in mainstream media sources, they usually focus on top down political debates between politicians, prison administrators, academics, and advocates. Incarcerated people are either left out of the official public discourse completely, or rendered as untrustworthy criminal objects.

Within this context, significant barriers exist to charting any social history of prisoners' lives within Angola when relying on traditional historical sources. These barriers are particularly heightened when focusing on the political organizing of incarcerated people and their allies. Mainstream media often disregards the political action of grassroots social movements at best, or at worst is often outright hostile to movements' aims and strategies.⁹⁵ Due to the stigma of criminalization, prisoners and their political allies are easy targets for delegitimization in their anti-prison struggles. Hence, it becomes necessary to turn to oral history and alternative media sources in piecing together the untold story of the Angola Special Civics Project and their partners for prison reform.

Therefore, because mainstream sources ignore or distort the lives of incarcerated activists, there is a political reason to focus my research on a combination of oral history interviews, archival research, and prison memoir. In her article "Challenging Penal Dependency: Activist

⁹⁴Foucault op cit; Ruth Wilson Gilmore op cit.

⁹⁵ Jackie Smith et al., "From Protest to Agenda Building: Description Bias in Media Coverage of Protest Events in Washington D.C.," *Social Forces* 79, no. 4 (June 2001): 1398.

Scholars and the Antiprison Movement,” activist-scholar Julia Sudbury writes that focusing on the testimonies of current and formerly incarcerated people in research “resists the silencing and dehumanization that are central to the processes of mass incarceration and social death.”⁹⁶

Through centering incarcerated people’s experiential knowledge, I hope to contest the dehumanization of those confined within prison walls and illuminate their subjectivity as evidenced by their active challenges to the structures of the Louisiana penal system.

Moreover, I argue that the knowledge of people with direct experience of the prison-industrial complex is of utmost importance to both understanding the operations of the prison system and to formulating oppositional strategies. In *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the US Prison Regime*, Dylan Rodriguez writes of the necessity of centering incarcerated activists, as part of what he terms “radical prison praxis.” Rodriguez traces how incarcerated peoples have developed key theoretical interpretations of the prison through their lived experiences, and as they have resisted the prison they have developed even deeper understandings.⁹⁷ Hence, the political necessity in centering the words and memories of men incarcerated at Angola in my research into Louisiana prison opposition.

A Note on Activist-Scholarship and Antiprison Politics

I came to this project as a graduate student trying to figure out my place within activist-scholarship. For almost a decade I have been personally involved in and committed to struggles for racial justice, particularly as they attempt to erode the seemingly ever-growing prison-industrial complex. As a teenager, I was politicized in the Unitarian Universalist faith tradition’s youth movement that was grappling with developing anti-racist politics and organizing the

⁹⁶ Julia Sudbury, "Challenging Penal Dependency: Activist Scholars and the Antiprison Movement," in *Activist Scholarship: Antiracism, Feminism, and Social Change*, ed. Julia Sudbury and Margo Okazawa-Rey (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2009), 30.

⁹⁷ Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 77-78.

broader faith community for prison reform. Over the last several years in New Orleans I have been involved in supporting community organizing for prison and police reform. Informed by the work of antiprison activists and writers, I see the system of incarceration as a fundamental site of upholding the systematic violence of white supremacy, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy in the United States. Based in this belief, I self-identify as a prison abolitionist who dreams of a world where love and compassion are guiding principles of society rather than fear and repression.

Given my political commitments, my work on this thesis has not been as a detached researcher, but as someone looking for untold histories of the prison system that might shed some light on avenues for strategic action. My experience and participation in political movements has deeply shaped my research and writing often beyond the influences of my academic training. My research questions have been informed by the conversations and tensions I have witnessed in grassroots organizing and my sense of accountability to my participants stems from years of anti-racist training. Indeed, the goal of my thesis is to be relevant to activists looking to learn from the successes and limitations of earlier organizing efforts. Furthermore, I hope readers of this project will be inspired by the story of the Angola Special Civics Project and be further moved towards collective action.

However, I do not wish to ignore the voyeur role I inhabit while engaged in studying Angola. As discussed by Julia Sudbury on the position of all activist-scholars involved in critical prison studies, my work is inherently complicated by the contradictions of benefiting by attaining my masters degree via studying the very prison system I desire to dismantle.⁹⁸ Indeed, as a white young woman born and raised in the US North with limited direct exposure to the Louisiana criminal justice system, my politics push me to examine my own motivations for this project and honestly consider the real possibility that my thesis will serve only to further my individual

⁹⁸ Sudbury, "Challenging Penal Dependency," 27-32.

academic career. Still, even with the contradictions, I think we all have much to learn from the story of men who struggled under confinement to develop alternatives to the newly emerging prison industrial complex in the Deep South.

CHAPTER 4: Political Opportunities Amidst the Rise of the Prison Industrial Complex

Introduction

During the 1970s and 1980s, law and order politics swept the nation. Following Nixon's prioritization of criminal justice as a national political issue in response to Black and Third World liberationist moments, states began enacting a series of draconian laws aimed at locking up more people for longer sentences.⁹⁹ Louisiana followed suit, expanding its penal system on a scale unmatched in its history. This included lengthening prison sentences, restricted criteria for parole and clemency, reduction of prisoners ability's to earn good time off their sentences, and the elimination of parole for entire classes of prisoners.¹⁰⁰ However, these political shifts did not result in prisoner apathy, but rather fostered a climate for prisoner organizing. In this chapter I will demonstrate that the combination of the political threat of natural life in prison, and the political opening of sympathetic corrections officials led to a dialectical process, which afforded incarcerated activists the political opportunity for the formation of the Angola Special Civics Project.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Louisiana legislature passed a series of laws enacting longer and stricter sentencing in response to federal court decisions. During the same period, Republican Governor Dave Treen curtailed the use of pardons and parole. While the political decisions made in Louisiana followed the general pattern sweeping the US, Louisiana stood out for both its heightened rate of incarceration and the severity of life sentencing. According to *The Angolite*, by 1984, Louisiana incarcerated a third of the nation's people serving life without parole sentences.¹⁰¹ These moves fueled hopelessness within Angola as scores upon scores of

⁹⁹ Parenti, 8-12.

¹⁰⁰ Ron Wikberg, "The Long-Termers," in *Life Sentences: Rage and Survival Behind Bars* (New York: Times Books, 1992), 233.

¹⁰¹ *The Angolite*, "Lifers," November/December 1984, News Briefs.

men began to fear dying behind prison walls. However, rather than passively accept their fate, the threat of life imprisonment led to the development of prisoners' collective resistance.

Yet, this period also brought a key political opportunity for the men inside seeking new methods of release. Sociologist James M. Jasper has articulated that "opportunities matter most to movements that have few of them, that are severely repressed."¹⁰² As incarcerated individuals, the men of the Angola Special Civics Project were highly regulated; opportunities taken for granted by the outside world had enormous impact for their organizing. The central opening was the appointment of a series of reformist corrections officials in response to the mismanagement of Angola during the 1960s and early 1970s. Similar to the history of prisoner organizing in Massachusetts at Walpole, reformist administrators created a climate tolerant to prisoner organizing.¹⁰³ Prisoners were given access to free presses and allowed to hold large events and meetings with outside supporters. In time, these political openings were taken advantage of by incarcerated activists at Angola strategizing for a way out.

The Rise of the Prison Industrial Complex

Historically, while the Louisiana prison system was continually under scrutiny for its corruption and ill management throughout the twentieth century, it was unusually lenient in the release opportunities afforded its prisoners. From 1886 until 1914, individuals with life sentences were eligible for release after serving fifteen years in prison. In 1916, the legislature created the Board of Parole and gave it the authority to parole lifers after a minimum of five years in prison.¹⁰⁴ Then, beginning in 1926, the Board of Pardons automatically reviewed all people

¹⁰² Jasper, 967.

¹⁰³ Jamie Bissonette, *When the Prisoners Ran Walpole: A True Story in the Movement for Prison Abolition* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2008), 41-50.

¹⁰⁴ Burk Foster, "What Is the Meaning of Life: The Evolution of Natural Life Sentences in Louisiana, 1973-1994" (lecture, Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences Annual Meeting, Boston, May 9, 1995), accessed March 10, 2011, www.burkfoster.com/MeaningofLife.htm.

incarcerated with a life sentence for a pardon after serving ten and a half years.¹⁰⁵ Although release was conditioned on the approval by the general manager of the prison that held the individual, in practice, people at all levels of the Louisiana criminal justice system began to assume that people serving life sentences with good behavior would be released under the “10/6” law.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, in a 1971 ruling converting a death row inmate’s sentence to life imprisonment, Louisiana Supreme Court Justice Joe Sanders stated that a life sentence “really means imprisonment for only ten years and six months. No true life sentence exists in Louisiana.”¹⁰⁷ Incoming inmates carried this understanding of law. According to Kenneth “Biggy” Johnston, when he was sentenced to life in prison in 1972, it was “understood that you do ten years and six months on life.”¹⁰⁸ However, the political tide was rapidly shifting, and Biggy Johnston soon found himself, like thousands around him, locked away for over twenty years.¹⁰⁹

In the 1970s, the Louisiana state legislature began slowly chipping away at what had become standard Louisiana legal practice for half a century. On June 29, 1972, the U.S. Supreme Court abolished the death penalty, voiding all death sentences across the nation. In response, the Louisiana Supreme Court resentenced all former death row prisoners to life imprisonment.¹¹⁰ Fearful of the political ramifications if former death row inmates were to end up paroled to the free world, the Louisiana legislature started restricting parole eligibility during the 1973 legislative session. Louisiana politicians revised the sentencing laws for second-degree murder

¹⁰⁵ Ron Wikberg, "The Long-Termers," 225.

¹⁰⁶ *The Angolite*, "A Rope without a Noose," September/October 1982, Legal Spectrum sec.

¹⁰⁷ *The Angolite*, "The Forgotten Men," May/June 1980, Cover Story.

¹⁰⁸ Johnston, Kenneth "Biggy" Interview by author. January 15, 2011.

¹⁰⁹ *The Angolite* is filled with stories of men growing old in Angola who were sentenced to life by trial or as a plea bargain and were promised by their personal attorneys, judges, and even prosecutors that they would only have to do ten years and six months.

¹¹⁰ Rideau, *In the Place of Justice*, 75.

life sentences, now requiring a minimum of twenty years served.¹¹¹ Under the new state constitution created in 1975, the legislature eliminated the automatic pardon review at ten years and six months. While lifers could still be reviewed for a pardon, a more stringent process was implemented. Finally, in 1979 the Louisiana Legislature completely repealed the “10-6 law” with retroactive effect frustrating the scores of men at Angola expecting to be pardoned after serving ten years and six months.¹¹² With this move, Louisiana became one of the few states in the nation to employ only natural life, also known as “life without parole” in its life sentencing.

Inside Angola’s walls, incarcerated men began witnessing the effects of the changes to the life sentencing laws. Norris Henderson states that the changes were dramatic:

By 1979, they had abolished all benefits around life sentences. No more parole, no probation, no suspension of sentence around life sentences so life actually became life. So the challenge to us now became: our numbers are growing astronomically, we just kind of went from a handful of lifers in the prison to all of a sudden “boom” everybody has life now... Something is wrong with this picture.¹¹³

When Henderson was first incarcerated in the early 1970s, he was one of a few lifers inside Angola. Within a decade the percentage of lifers inside increased exponentially. In 1972, there were only 193 men serving natural life sentences, but by 1982 those numbers had increased to 1,084.¹¹⁴ This was the result of the changes to life sentences plus elimination of “good time” laws and work furloughs.¹¹⁵ Imprisoned men recognized that the changing laws served as a political threat against them.

These legal changes were not passively accepted. Writers at *The Angolite* worked to publicize the issue in dozens of articles during the early 1980s. In particular, Angolite staff

¹¹¹ *The Angolite*, "Life: No Rhyme, No Reason," September/October 1982, Special Section.

¹¹² *The Angolite*. "On the 10-6 Front," March/April 1983, Legal Spectrum sec.

¹¹³ Henderson, Norris. Interview by author. December 14, 2010.

¹¹⁴ Foster, "What is the Meaning of Life." By 1994, there were over 2,500 natural life sentences in the Louisiana prisons system.

¹¹⁵ *The Angolite*, "A Hidden Agenda?" September/October 1984 Sept/Oct, Commentary.

highlighted the racialized nature of the application of new sentencing laws. For example, the 1982 Special Section story, “Life: No Rhyme, No Reason,” argued that Black defendants were being sentenced to life while white defendants with similar charges were sentenced to the lesser charge of manslaughter. Then chairmen of the Angola Lifers Association, Andrew Joseph, is quoted stating,

Blacks today before a court of law are in much the same situation they were in during the days of the Ku Klux Klan – the only difference is that today many of the racists wear black robes instead of white ones. We find that all that was accomplished during the civil rights era has been lost or drastically reduced.¹¹⁶

These arguments specifically contested the repeal of the 10-6 law on the grounds that officers of the court had assured them the possibility of parole upon their conviction while also calling attention to the deeper racial power dynamics at play in the criminal justice system.

Furthermore, numerous prisoners sentenced under the 10-6 law legally challenged the state for their rights to parole eligibility. As early as 1979, lifers Biggy Johnston and Ron Wikberg began doing legal research on the 10-6 repeal to try and challenge the retroactive effect of the law.¹¹⁷ By the early 1980s, several people who had accepted a guilty plea bargain under the promise that a life sentence was ten years and six months challenged their convictions on the argument that the state had broken its plea bargain. In response, the Fifth Circuit court issued contradictory rulings with most people’s convictions being upheld, but a few individuals’ convictions were overturned.¹¹⁸ For a while, this gave lifers at Angola sentenced under the 10-6 law hope that they had a chance at freedom. This hope did not last long, as in February of 1985 the Louisiana Supreme Court decided once and for all that the new life sentencing laws were

¹¹⁶ *The Angolite*, “Life: No Rhyme, No Reason,” September/October 1982, Special Section.

¹¹⁷ *The Angolite*, “The Forgotten Men,” May/June 1980, Cover Story.

¹¹⁸ *The Angolite*, “The Effects of Dunn,” March/April 1982, Legal Spectrum; *The Angolite*, “A Rope without a Noose,” Sept/Oct 1982, Legal Spectrum; *The Angolite*, “On the 10-6 Front,” March/April 1983.

applicable to all lifers, regardless of the law when they were sentenced.¹¹⁹ Now, prisoners' only option for release lay with receiving some form of commutation from the governor, but this possibility was quickly narrowing as well.¹²⁰

Legislators were not the only political officials influenced by the law and order politics sweeping the nation. During the 1980s, the issue of crime became central to gubernatorial campaigns with much attention given to the clemency process. In 1979, Republican Dave Treen was elected governor of Louisiana. Treen campaigned as being tough on crime and that he would curtail the use of pardons. As governor, Treen kept true to his word by implementing an unspoken moratorium on clemency during his first year.¹²¹ His record during his second year was only slightly better at having granted nine commutations.¹²² This was in sharp contrast to the previous governor, Edwin Edwards, who commuted 2,218 people between 1972 and 1980.¹²³ Moreover, the parole board, appointed by Treen, created stricter guidelines to reduce the number of paroles granted.¹²⁴ Under these circumstance, Norris Henderson recalls, "nobody's moving cause everybody's following the mandate of the governor."¹²⁵

According to Wilbert Rideau, Treen's approach to clemency had a marked influence on the population in Angola.

It fueled hopelessness among the prisoner population. The situation in the prison became so incendiary that [the warden], who had never asked for the release of a prisoner, suggested to [the pardon board chairman] that the governor commute the sentences of a couple of deserving lifers to relieve tensions at Angola.¹²⁶

¹¹⁹ *The Angolite*, "The Turner Death Knell," March/April 1985, Legal Spectrum.

¹²⁰ Johnston, Kenneth "Biggy" Interview by author. January 15, 2011.

¹²¹ *The Angolite*, "Treen Speaks Out on Pardons," November/December 1981, News Briefs.

¹²² Rideau, *In the Place of Justice*, 170.

¹²³ *The Angolite*, "Life: No Rhyme, No Reason," September/October 1982, Special Section.

¹²⁴ *The Angolite*, "Treen Speaks Out on Pardons," November/December 1981, News Briefs.

¹²⁵ Henderson, Norris. Interview by author. December 14, 2010.

¹²⁶ Rideau, *In the Place of Justice*, 171.

Even with Treen increasing his commutations, the Angola population was on edge. Not only was no one getting out of Angola, the combination of harsher sentencing laws and lack of pardons or paroles being granted led to the swelling of the Louisiana penal system. By 1983, there was a net increase of 128 sentenced prisoners a month in Louisiana.¹²⁷ Quickly Angola became overcrowded. While *Angolite* staffers suggested alternatives to incarceration and an increase in clemencies granted to deal with this situation, Governor Treen sought to fix the situation by implementing “double-bunking” which was housing more prisoners in cells than they were designed for.¹²⁸ Federal courts rejected this plan, but the devaluation of prisoners’ lives under Treen’s administration was clearly evident.¹²⁹

During Treen’s re-election campaign against Edwin Edwards in 1983, the politicians’ different politics on clemency was in the forefront of the election. With Treen trailing Edwards in the polls, he focused his campaign on attacking Edwards’s liberal stance on clemency during his time as governor.¹³⁰ Although Edwards ended up defeating Treen in a landslide, Treen’s focus on clemency had ripple effects beyond the election. By highlighting the clemency process during the campaign, Treen’s brought more visibility to the clemency process than it had ever had in Louisiana.¹³¹ In doing so, he made it a public litmus for other gubernatorial candidates to be measured against in future elections. The other ripple of the 1983 election had a quite different effect. For those incarcerated inside Angola, the differing clemency politics of Edwards and Treen underscored to them the tangible differences between Democratic and

¹²⁷ *The Angolite*, “The Crowded Cage,” November/December 1983, Cover Story.

¹²⁸ *The Angolite*, “The Double-Bunking Issue,” September/October 1982, Editorial. The other option proposed, and eventually adopted, was the expansion of the Louisiana prison system.

¹²⁹ Burk Foster, “Politics and Pardons: How It All Went Wrong,” *The Angolite*, January/February 1988.

¹³⁰ Burk Foster, “Politics and Pardons: How It All Went Wrong,” *The Angolite*, January/February 1988.

¹³¹ Burk Foster, “Politics and Pardons: How It All Went Wrong,” *The Angolite*, January/February 1988.

Republican administrations.¹³² This governor's election demonstrated the material power the outcomes of state electoral politics had on their lives. Such a realization would deeply inform the strategies of the Angola Special Civics Project a few years down the road.

From Crisis to Opportunity

While the 1970s and 1980s witnessed the expansion of the Louisiana prison system through stiffer sentencing laws and reductions in the granting of parole and pardons, the era was also accompanied by the institutionalization of reformist corrections administrations. These officials' tolerance of prisoners' organizing provided a valuable political opportunity for incarcerated activists. Their actions allowed for prisoners to have connections to the outside world unimaginable in most prison. This raises the question: how was it that such a reformist administration was implemented in one of the most notorious prisons in the country? During the early 1970s, a series of crises led to the changing of the state's corrections department.

When Edwin Edwards entered office for his first term as Governor in 1972, Angola was rife with mismanagement and corruption. He appointed reformer Elayn Hunt as Corrections Head to clean up Angola, who in turn appointed out-of-state reformer C. Murray Henderson as warden of Angola.¹³³ Robert Hillary King writes in his memoir *From the Bottom of the Heap* that the pre-existing administration at Angola resented the newcomers, which led to infighting.¹³⁴ Angola's old guard faction responded by letting the prison devolve further than it already had. Between 1973-1975 there were forty stabbing deaths at Angola and over 300 non-fatal knife injuries. Once again, Angola became known as the bloodiest prison in the nation.

¹³² Johnston, Kenneth "Biggy" Interview by author. January 15, 2011; Henderson, Norris. Personal communication with author. October 7, 2010.

¹³³ Robert Hillary King, *From the Bottom of the Heap: the Autobiography of Black Panther Robert Hillary King*. (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2009), 175; *The Angolite*, "A New Beginnings," March/April 1984, Cover Story.

¹³⁴ Robert Hillary King, *From the Bottom of the Heap: the Autobiography of Black Panther Robert Hillary King*. (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2009), 175

Also in 1975, in response to a lawsuit by prisoners challenging conditions at Angola, federal district courts instructed the state of Louisiana to overhaul the Department of Corrections.¹³⁵ The Edwards administration used this as an opportunity to implement the changes they had already been working on. He appointed more reform-oriented officials to make the changes at Angola. These officials

armed by federal court order and backed by Edwards... moved aggressively to bring Angola under the umbrella of authority of the Baton Rouge administration. Within 18 months, they had ended the violence, cleaned up the prison, and relieved overcrowding.¹³⁶

A key difference of these officials' philosophy from earlier ones was their belief that rehabilitation was possible and should be the goal of Angola. In addition to following the regulations set in place by the court order, the administration sought greater transparency between the population of Angola and the staff. To that end, prison administrator C. Paul Phelps allowed *The Angolite* to run as an uncensored paper, and committed that *Angolite* staff have access to the information they needed for their journalistic work.¹³⁷ *The Angolite* was given so much freedom that it eventually was granted an unmonitored telephone with which to conduct interviews. Moreover, prisoner organizations were allowed to have outsiders attend their meetings and given greater latitude in networking with experts and community members.¹³⁸ Although Governor Treen dismissed the majority of reformist administrators while governor from 1980-1984, once Edwards re-entered the governor's office in 1984 reformist administrators were re-instated and previous policies were re-adopted.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ *The Angolite*, "A New Beginnings," March/April 1984, Cover Story.

¹³⁶ *The Angolite*, "A New Beginnings," March/April 1984, Cover Story.

¹³⁷ Rideau, *In the Place of Justice*, 113.

¹³⁸ Henderson, Norris. Personal communication with author. October 7, 2010.

¹³⁹ *The Angolite*, "A New Beginnings," March/April 1984, Cover Story.

Corrections officials publically shared their thoughts on the new sentencing policies passed in the legislature. Throughout the 1980s, various wardens and secretaries of corrections told *The Angolite* that life without parole was not a true solution for rehabilitation or decreasing crime in Louisiana.¹⁴⁰ Angola administrators backed up their words by having the Department of Corrections sponsor bills in the Louisiana legislature in 1984 that sought to alleviate prison overcrowding by expanding parole and probation as alternatives to incarceration.¹⁴¹ However, in the tough on crime political climate, administrators found themselves unable to make headway with the Louisiana legislature. Still, although prison officials did not actively advocate on behalf of incarcerated people at Angola organizing for their freedom, their own political stances on incarceration influenced them to be tolerant of prisoner organizations seeking alternative solutions to the current state of the criminal justice system.

Conclusion

By the mid-1980s, a combination of political threats and openings had converged on Angola to create an environment conducive to prisoner organizing. Between 1972 and 1982, the Louisiana legislature had taken a sharp turn to the right in its approach towards sentencing. In less than a decade Louisiana went from having some of the most lenient life sentencing laws in the country, to the most stringent. These changes, coupled with a series of tough on crimes laws passed by the Louisiana legislature, led to the explosion of the Louisiana prison population. At the same time, the election of Republican Governor Dave Treen ushered in a new moment in Louisiana's approach to clemency. Breaking with his predecessors, Governor Treen politicized

¹⁴⁰ Ron Wikberg, "The Long-Termers," in *Life Sentences: Rage and Survival Behind Bars* (New York: Times Books, 1992), 233; *The Angolite*, "Phelps on Parting," November/December 1981, Inside Angola; Anne Butler Hamilton and C. Murray Henderson, *Angola: Louisiana State Penitentiary, a Half-century of Rage and Reform* (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1990), 158.

¹⁴¹ Marsha Shuler, "Prison Bills Downed," *Morning Advocate* (Baton Rouge), June 10, 1984.

the clemency process in attempts to gain political favor via law and order politics. Although Treen lost re-election, his political campaign influenced Louisianans to be suspicious of pardons and commutations. The rise of tough on crime politics would become a mobilizing threat for prisoners.

Even as the 1970s and 1980s were a time of hopelessness and internal crisis for the men incarcerated at Angola, the events of the era also created the structures of possibility for organizing for change within Angola. While politicians in Louisiana focused on expanding the state's penal system, Department of Corrections officials supported prison reforms that would reduce the population at Angola. Over years state legislators were elected by Louisianians influenced by tough on crime rhetoric leading to the passing of conservative criminal justice policies. When crisis overtook Angola in the early 1970s, federal judges ordered the reformation of the Louisiana prison system. To appease the judges, Edwin Edwards appointed several reform-minded administrators at the Department of Corrections and Angola. Officials spoke out against life without parole sentencing and supported a greater degree of self-autonomy than had ever been known at Angola. These administrations would prove to be fertile ground on which prisoners began to self-organize against the new laws by the mid-1980s. Moreover, Dave Treen's term as governor demonstrated the political differences of Republican and Democratic governors to the population at Angola. Through identifying the differences, prisoners at Angola were able to clarify the power structures influencing their incarceration. By the mid-1980s, a group of men inside Angola was ready to unite together to change the Louisiana penal system.

CHAPTER 5: Angola Special Civics Project

“From that point on, Angola was primed up for something like the Civics Project, and then they got even more serious when people stopped going home. When people stopped going home, then you got...you got to change your strategy” –Biggy Johnston

Introduction

Faced with the changes to the Louisiana criminal justice system, the men inside Angola refused to give up their hopes for freedom. Seeking an avenue out of the prison, the incarcerated men at Angola were moved to collectivize their struggle for freedom. While previous generations of prisoners at Angola had individually petitioned the Governor and parole board for release, with those mechanisms cut off, prisoners were required to develop new strategies for release. During the 1980s, a series of reform-minded correctional administrations created an environment where prisoner organizing was not only tolerated, but at times even encouraged. Incarcerated men at Angola remembered a different era in the state’s attitude towards incarceration and believed it could change again. Building off the pre-existing internal structures of the law library and prisoner clubs that incarcerated activists had used to bring attention to conditions and legally challenge their personal cases, the people imprisoned inside Angola formed the Angola Special Civics Project in 1986.

Through the Angola Special Civics Project, prisoners motivated by their collective self-interest for freedom centered their own experiences of incarceration. Their experiential knowledge and goal of freedom from incarceration led them to strategize for structural changes that would create mechanisms for release. This was in contrast to earlier eras when the focus had been on creating better conditions under confinement, rather than leaving Angola all together. These new strategies included electoral organizing, coalition building, and crafting new sentencing laws. Throughout this process, they argued for their own leadership in prisoner reform efforts in alliance with outside supporters who could broaden their base and develop

political leverage for their campaigns. By working in accountable relationships, the Civics Project put the issue of prison reform on the agenda of social justice activists in Louisiana while winning expanded parole opportunities for prisoners across the state. I argue this moment can be understood as an example of abolitionist reform.

Precursors to the Civics Project

Early percolations of collective organizing appeared at Angola in the 1970s. Prior to the late 1970s, although Angola had a law library, only the prisoners assigned to work in the law library had access to the stacks. Given the small staff size of the law library, this rule significantly limited the amount of prisoners able to research their cases and file appeals. Frustrated by this process, law librarian Biggy Johnston filed a joint lawsuit to allow greater inmate access to the law library. After winning the suit, prisoners were able to access law materials themselves, and Johnston began teaching law classes to train prisoners “about what post-conviction was all about and how they could possibly use it to get out of prison.”¹⁴² In addition to training prisoners to better file their own legal proceedings, exceptional students were given the highly sought after staff assignments in the law library.¹⁴³ Through this training program, an entire cohort of prisoners learned legal jargon, the state’s legal codes, and the means to file appeals. Furthermore, the law library became a key site of personal relationship building amongst prisoners. For example, Biggy Johnston and Norris Henderson first met when Henderson was working to overturn his wrongful conviction.¹⁴⁴ By working together, they developed trust and respect between one another. This would turn out to be crucial, as they became leaders for prisoner organizing.

¹⁴² Kenneth "Biggy" Johnston, interview by author, January 15, 2011.

¹⁴³ *The Angolite*, “The New Jailhouse Lawyer,” March/April 1979. Checo Yancy, interview by author, January 7, 2011. The law library paid the highest of Angola’s jobs at \$0.20/hour. The position did offer prestige within the prison where legal knowledge was a high commodity.

¹⁴⁴ Kenneth "Biggy" Johnston, interview by author, January 15, 2011.

Another space of prisoner self-organization was the Angola Lifers' Association.

Originally formed as a social club, the state's changing life sentencing laws influenced members of the Lifers to change the orientation of the group. In 1982, lifer Eddie Hall stated,

this caused us to change our goals and policies from one of socializing to the business of just trying to get out of this place...we have to gear our efforts in the judiciary. We have to gear our efforts toward becoming more knitted together as a group and find the information and the facts we need to get out of here.¹⁴⁵

To that end, the Lifers went beyond supporting one another to endure life in Angola to supporting one another to file appeals to their cases. Especially since so many of them were sentenced under the 10-6 law, they recognized that it would effect more lifers to challenge the retroactive nature of the statute rather than for each person to individually petition for release based on their specific circumstances. They explicitly stated that they would focus on attaining freedom for all lifers, and that their futures were all intertwined.¹⁴⁶ Because they were undergoing a shared experience not only of incarceration, but of life without parole under the new laws, they developed a sense of collective identity with one another. Their strategic framing of the structural constraints of the new political stance necessitated collective strategies of resistance.

Birth of the Special Civics Project

By the mid-1980s, despite the impact of the re-election of Edwin Edwards in 1984, times were desperate at Angola. Morale among the prisoner population had gotten so low that there was speculation that the prison was about to erupt in a riot. In the words of Norris Henderson,

All the things they measure were ripe at Angola. I mean hopelessness was there. Nobody was going home, people with long sentences. You name it. It was evident in Angola. So at this time, we, me and some other guys, started thinking about what we can do to change *not necessarily our conditions, but our circumstances*.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Tommy Mason, "The Lifers Association," *The Angolite*, September/October 1982, Inside Angola sec.

¹⁴⁶ Tommy Mason, "The Lifers Association," *The Angolite*, September/October 1982, Inside Angola sec.

¹⁴⁷ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010.

By this Henderson meant they should not focus on making the conditions *inside* Angola better, but rather should focus on no longer being incarcerated. With the 10-6 law officially dead, and the lifer population ballooning, those incarcerated at Angola recognized that they needed to collectively organize for freedom instead of using individual legal strategies to attain release. Having learned about prison riots that occurred in New York, New Mexico, and Oklahoma, activists inside Angola realized that after the dust had settled, at the worst the riots had brought increased repression, while at the best it brought better conditions, but either way everyone was still behind bars.¹⁴⁸ With this knowledge, Biggy Johnston and Norris Henderson decided to go a different route in strategizing a way out of the penitentiary. Based on their experiences at Angola under different governors' administrations, they identified state officials, not prison administrators, as the real site of power. Edwards's re-election campaign was on the horizon, and since they believed Democrats to be more receptive to their goals than Republicans, they decided to organize their friends and families on the outside to vote as a bloc for Edwards. Since all sources indicated this would be a close election, they thought if they successfully organized a bloc big enough to be the deciding factor, the prisoners would have political bargaining power. This would both put an official they viewed as more sympathetic in office and would show him the political leverage they had attained despite their status as incarcerated individuals.¹⁴⁹

Henderson and Johnston began recruiting people they knew from working in the law library to join them in this effort. Each of their specific leadership styles drew people into the project. By this time, Johnston's legal skills teaching classes and winning appeals had gained him the status as a "legal genius."¹⁵⁰ Henderson, meanwhile, had a reputation unmatched at

¹⁴⁸ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010.

¹⁴⁹ Wilbert Rideau, "Special Civics Project," *The Angolite*, November/December 1987, Politics.

¹⁵⁰ Kenneth "Biggy" Johnston, interview by author, January 15, 2011; Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010; *The Angolite*, "The New Jailhouse Lawyer," March/April 1979.

Angola. In *The Place of Justice* Wilbert Rideau describes Norris Henderson as “the most popular of Angola’s prisoners.”¹⁵¹ Norris Henderson’s popularity stemmed from his reputation as always speaking out against injustice wherever he saw it, whether it was the administration against the prisoners or prisoner against prisoner. Over time people began to trust that his only real motive in Angola was trying to get himself and everyone else released. This engendered Henderson the respect of the entire prison across race and religion, which was no small feat in an environment deeply structured by prison politics and internal factions. He even had a smooth relationship with the prison administration.¹⁵² Thus, when it became time to bring people into this project, it was an easy sell. Civics Project member Eugene Dean said that he “just got fully involved in it because of Norris’s reputation.”¹⁵³ From the beginning, the project held a degree of legitimacy based on its leaders. Norris Henderson reflected that, “the combination of us, I think made us the thing that sang... The guy that could pull people together and the guy who had the legal wherewithal to make something happen.”¹⁵⁴ Their leadership was fundamental to successfully building a collective organization within Angola.

While they generally recruited people they knew from working in the law library into the project, one person in particular brought important knowledge to the group. Checo Yancy, another law library staffer, had previously worked for the Clerk of Court in Orleans Parish and the Election Commission. Based on his prior experience, Yancy had extensive knowledge about working for elections. He began educating everyone in the Special Civics Project about the

¹⁵¹ Rideau, *In the Place of Justice*, 228.

¹⁵² Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010. The degree to which Norris Henderson was trusted and respected cannot be overexaggerated. In every interview I conducted, the participant brought up on their own how much they trusted him and his invaluable leadership. This has not changed since Henderson was released from Angola. Members of the New Orleans social justice community regularly remark that Norris Henderson is one of the most principled and respected organizers they know.

¹⁵³ Eugene Dean. Interview by author. December 31, 2010.

¹⁵⁴ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010.

“political science about the theory of registering. The theory of getting people out to vote. The theory of organizing people and letting them know they had a voice.”¹⁵⁵ Soon, the Special Civics Project had mapped out the different precincts across the state and began charting the different districts where the prisoners they knew had family and friends.¹⁵⁶ At this time the Louisiana penal system had a population of approximately 15,000 and Angola had a population of over 4,000.¹⁵⁷ Members of the Angola Special Civics Project figured if they could get even a fraction of prisoners involved in organizing their friends and families to vote in the upcoming campaign, they could sway the election.

In July of 1987, *The Angolite* editors involved in the project publicized the strategy through a public service announcement. This announcement outlined the importance of the upcoming governor’s race and urged prisoners to get their people on the outside to register to vote and to vote in the interests of incarcerated people. In particular the ad called on prisoners’ sense of self-empowerment:

Instead of letting the vote of our people be influenced and misguided by local and state leaders who probably don’t give a damn about us, let’s do it ourselves. Let’s utilize the votes of our people to express ourselves in this year’s state elections. We have a golden opportunity to perhaps impact the outcome of some tight races, and subsequently, our own destiny.¹⁵⁸

Within the context of the highly regulated and controlled atmosphere of the prison, these claims for prisoners to determine their own futures through organizing contested the very disenfranchisement the Louisiana penal system sought to impose. With this sense that they

¹⁵⁵ Checo Yancy, Interview by author. January 7, 2011.

¹⁵⁶ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010.

¹⁵⁷ “The Crowded Cage,” *The Shreveport Journal*, August 9, 1988, Editorials.

¹⁵⁸ *The Angolite*, “A Public Service Announcement,” July/August 1987. It is also worth noting that in my archival research of *The Angolite*, this was the only public service announcement I discovered in over fifteen years of issues. This uniqueness of this ad speaks to the importance of this political moment for men at Angola.

should be at the forefront of any decisions or policies that impacted them, they moved forward with their campaign.

During August, the Angola Special Civics Project received a boost from outside allies. Ted Quant of the Loyola University Institute for Human Relations was invited to attend an Angola Special Civics Project meeting at Angola. Up until this meeting, Quant had experience working to secure the individual release of a number of different prisoners, including Wilbert Rideau, but he had not worked with a collective organization of prisoners.¹⁵⁹ When he walked into the meeting, the walls were covered with charts and graphs. He remembers, “they had these magnificent graphs – how much it costs to incarcerate, how many people in prison, how many family members, what it would mean if a certain number of those people voted.”¹⁶⁰ Once the meeting began, members got up and detailed their plan that if all the prisoners at Angola and across the state got their people on the outside engaged in the election they could potentially flip the governor’s race, and put prison reform as an issue on the agenda. At the end of the presentations, they asked for people to support their effort, and Ted Quant, deeply impressed with their strategy and organization, decided to join them.¹⁶¹

With only a few months left until the election, the Angola Special Civics Project went into high gear in its campaign. The members focused on setting up networks outside the prison consisting of their families and friends. From within Angola, members of the Civics Project conducted a letter writing campaign in which they described the issues in the upcoming election

¹⁵⁹ Ted Quant. Interview by author. February 9, 2011.

¹⁶⁰ Katy Reckdahl, "Not Barred," *Gambit Weekly* (New Orleans), March 30, 2004, News sec., accessed April 6, 2011, <http://www.bestofneworleans.com/gambit/not-barred/Content?oid=1242661>.

¹⁶¹ Ted Quant. Interview by author. February 9, 2011.

and asked their families to get involved.¹⁶² They met together in geographical groups to set up support networks and pool resources from their home communities. For instance, one member's father in Shreveport offered office space, phone service, and administrative support to coordinate the organizing of families and friends in their region.¹⁶³ Family members and friends located in the New Orleans area were directed to get in touch with Ted Quant who was coordinating that area.¹⁶⁴ Additionally, Quant made contact with organizations and community groups that already had relationships with currently or formerly incarcerated people including resident council leadership from the C.J. Peete and Lafitte housing projects, Hope House, and the Loyola Urban Partners program.¹⁶⁵ From both inside and outside, activists focused not only on getting people aware of the upcoming campaign and registered to vote, but used the moment as an opportunity to draw attention to the costs of expanding the Louisiana prison system while shrinking the state's social services. Also, they emphasized how the expansion of the prison system was disproportionately affecting Black Louisianans, and the need to recognize this issue as connected to longer historical legacies of racism. They hoped this could be a moment to catalyze people across the state to work for structural prison reform.

Throughout the process, outside allies were accountable to Civics Project members. In the same vein as radical Black slavery abolitionists¹⁶⁶ and Black Freedom Movement activists¹⁶⁷ that had come before them, they argued that the people most affected by systems of oppression

¹⁶² Ted Quant. Interview by author. February 9, 2011; Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010; Kenneth "Biggy" Johnston, interview by author, January 15, 2011; Wilbert Rideau, "Special Civics Project," *The Angolite*, November/December 1987, Politics.

¹⁶³ Wilbert Rideau, "Special Civics Project," *The Angolite*, November/December 1987, Politics.

¹⁶⁴ Ted Quant. Interview by author. February 9, 2011.

¹⁶⁵ Ted Quant. Interview by author. February 9, 2011; Wilbert Rideau, "Special Civics Project," *The Angolite*, November/December 1987, Politics.

¹⁶⁶ Frederick Douglass, Philip Sheldon Foner, and Yuval Taylor, *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999).

¹⁶⁷ Payne op cit; Ransby op cit.

should be at the forefront of any movements for change. From the beginning the Civics Project made clear that the people in prison should be the leadership of this movement.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, leaders explained that as prisoners had already been disempowered and silenced through the criminal justice system; if they replicated those same dynamics through the organizing process it would contribute to their continued subordination. Prisoners had identified the issues and they had envisioned the strategy. In the minds of the members of the Civics Project, there was no one better to lead the prisoners to freedom but themselves. At the same time, they articulated the need for contributions from outsiders in solidarity with them. Being held captive inside Angola meant they were cut off from certain information about the outside world. Therefore, outside allies such as Ted Quant had key information to share to strengthen the campaign. Additionally, the allies' role was not to indiscriminately agree with all of the incarcerated leaders' ideas, but to work in mutual partnership in ways that pushed the group forward. Simply romanticizing prisoners would not inherently contribute to their freedom.¹⁶⁹

The New Orleans group of allies and the Civics Project held sister press conferences on September 22, 1987. In the morning, the New Orleans group announced their support for the Civics Project and called for the need for prison reform. They stated,

We believe that [the criminal justice system] has failed us, in large part, because politicians find it expedient to court votes by demagogically riding the law-and-order bandwagon, calling for bigger jails and longer sentences while cutting funds for education, drug rehabilitation, and other programs that would reduce crime.¹⁷⁰

After the conference, they distributed thousands of leaflets outlining their strategy which included not only voting in the upcoming election but a prison reform platform of expanded parole eligibility, shorter sentences, incarceration alternatives, and educational programs geared

¹⁶⁸ Ted Quant. Interview by author. February 9, 2011.

¹⁶⁹ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010; Ted Quant. Interview by author. February 9, 2011.

¹⁷⁰ Wilbert Rideau, "Special Civics Project," *The Angolite*, November/December 1987, Politics.

at successful re-entry.¹⁷¹ The Civics Project believed that incarcerated individuals deserved a chance to get out, but they also needed programs to prevent recidivism. That afternoon, the Angola Special Civics Project and representatives from other prisoner organizations held a press conference at Angola announcing their agreement to work across the prison to generate a voting bloc amongst their families and friends. In their speeches, Civics Project members stated this effort would not end after this election, but would strive for a long-term statewide constituency that could effectively impact Louisiana politics.¹⁷² However, in neither event did the groups state for whom they were planning to vote. Civics Project leaders recognized that based on the current tough-on-crime political climate, by stating publically who they were organizing for, they would give their opponents ammunition against their favored candidate. Hence, their outside allies kept secret who they were planning to vote for until the day of the election so their campaign could not benefit the other side. Furthermore, the Civics Project decided not to employ their voting bloc until the run-off election when the campaigning would be at its most heightened point giving the Civics Project the largest opportunity to be the deciding factor. They figured once the election had been won, their candidate, Edwin Edwards, would be compelled to support prison reform.¹⁷³

Unfortunately, before the run-off occurred, the election was over. Even though Governor Edwards was coming under fire for corruption charges, he was still considered the candidate to beat. Then, Republican Buddy Roemer, who had been an unknown Christian evangelical candidate for much of the campaign, began winning endorsements from newspapers across the state. After the primary Roemer was the front-runner with Edwards coming in second. Soon after the primary, Edwards shocked everyone by dropping out of the race leaving Buddy Roemer to

¹⁷¹ Floyd Webb, "Special Civics Project," *The Angolite*, January/February 1990.

¹⁷² Wilbert Rideau, "Special Civics Project," *The Angolite*, November/December 1987, Politics.

¹⁷³ Wilbert Rideau, "Special Civics Project," *The Angolite*, November/December 1987, Politics.

assume the governorship.¹⁷⁴ The Civics Project was never even given a chance to see if their electoral strategy would work. Activists inside Angola were disheartened both by the anticlimactic nature of their campaign, and the election of another law and order politician.¹⁷⁵

Return of Crisis and Reformulation of the Civics Project

The Roemer Revolution

Buddy Roemer entered office in March of 1988 committing to professionalize and depoliticize the Louisiana clemency process. Roemer ignored virtually all pardon recommendations sent to him during his first year in office. During the 1988 winter holiday season, Roemer was the first governor since 1982 not to grant a single clemency. Faced with these circumstances, prisoners at Angola entered into a new period of bleakness. The desperation of prisoners at Angola became increasingly evident as the suicide, murder, and attempted escape toll steadily grew through 1988 and 1989. Attempted escapees explained their actions by stating they had given up hope of ever getting out of prison. *The Angolite* staff wrote articles to highlight to the outside world, and in particular to the media, the connection between the acts of desperation inside Angola and Roemer's clemency policy. In June of 1989, Federal Judge Polozola declared that Angola was once again in a state of emergency naming the four murders, sixty-four stabbings, four suicides, and eleven escapes since Roemer assumed the governorship. Polozola ordered a full civil and criminal investigation of Angola.¹⁷⁶

In response, Governor Roemer was pushed to reform his clemency policy slightly, and by July, Larry Smith was appointed as the first Black Deputy Secretary of Corrections and Interim Warden of Angola. Many prisoners inside Angola were excited about the opportunity Smith

¹⁷⁴ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010; Ted Quant. Interview by author. February 9, 2011; Wilbert Rideau, "Special Civics Project," *The Angolite*, November/December 1987, Politics.

¹⁷⁵ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010.

¹⁷⁶ Rideau, *In the Place of Justice* 194-202; *The Angolite*, "The Omen," May/June 1989.

brought to running Angola. For the first time in Angola's history, Smith implemented an election process for inmate representatives to meet with prison administrators on prison operations.¹⁷⁷

Wilbert Rideau recalls that Smith's appointment signaled to prisoners at Angola the possibility of hope. "For them, Smith embodied hope because he represented the impossible in their lives—a black man running Angola. If that could happen, maybe the impossible could happen for them too."¹⁷⁸ Once again, out of crisis, came the appointment of reformist prison administrators, this time one who specifically supported prisoner organizing.

Legitimation of Incarcerated Leadership

Following Edwards' withdrawal from the governor's election, the momentum around the Civics Project drastically declined. Feeling deflated, several members left the project and its stature within Angola diminished. Still, the Civics Project was not over. Although the project was put on hold immediately following Roemer's election, the reforms following the state of emergency served to rejuvenate the project.¹⁷⁹ During 1988 and 1989, leaders of the Civics Project assessed their previous work. First, leaders evaluated their strength within Angola itself. While they had amassed significant support from organizations such as the Lifers' and *The Angolite*, there was still hesitation by other prisoners. Some prisoners believed that the Civics Project was a Black-only organization, while others believed it was an organization just for lifers. The Civics Project leadership recognized that they needed to build trust across Angola in order to create a truly collective prisoner movement. They recognized the importance of unity as foundational strategy. They began by further democratizing their organizational structure. They decided to have greater participation from throughout Angola by having representatives from the

¹⁷⁷ Rideau, *In the Place of Justice*, 204; *The Angolite*, "The Omen," May/June 1989; *The Angolite*, "The Reality of Change," May/April 1990.

¹⁷⁸ Rideau, *In the Place of Justice*, 204.

¹⁷⁹ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010; Floyd Webb, "Special Civics Project," *The Angolite*, January/February 1990.

outer camps within the prison, representatives from the various geographic areas of Louisiana, plus representatives of various sentences and convictions.¹⁸⁰ This was key as the entire prison would be unable to attend Civics Project meetings, but by having representatives they could most effectively organize the rest of the prison with their forty-person membership. Norris Henderson remembers “that was probably the greatest decision we made to engage other folks because then the support of everybody in the prison just took off.”¹⁸¹

With a broader base of support within Angola, the Civics Project worked to deepen the collective nature of the organization. They solidified a new organizational structure with Henderson and Johnston remaining the chair and co-chair of the projects with five committees beneath them: Correspondence Committee, Legal Research Committee, Vital Statistics Committee, Distribution Committee, and the Current Events Committee.¹⁸² Within the committee structure, it was imperative that all members of the organization felt valued and respected. Every role was considered equally important to the greater project, from researching legislation to stuffing envelopes. This was fundamental to the membership feeling committed to working towards something larger than themselves, as part of a movement for prison reform. Members of the Civics Project focused on working for change greater than their own individual cases. They were committed for the long haul of changing the Louisiana penal system.¹⁸³ Checo Yancey remembers the saying of the time was “ ‘We’re in the same boat.’ If I put a hole in the boat, we’re all gonna sink. Doesn’t matter if you’re white, [or] Black. You got a life sentence, I

¹⁸⁰ Norris Henderson. Personal Communication. October 7, 2010.

¹⁸¹ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010.

¹⁸² Floyd Webb, “Special Civics Project,” *The Angolite*, January/February 1990; Kenneth "Biggy" Johnston, interview by author, January 15, 2011.

¹⁸³ Eugene Dean. Interview by author. December 31, 2010; Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010.

got a life sentence, but we're gonna work together."¹⁸⁴ With this organizational structure and philosophy, the Civics Project began strategizing anew.

Beyond gaining trust and respect from their base, the Civics Project was also continually compelled to demonstrate their legitimacy to the outside world. As primarily Black prisoners, members of the Civics Project were constructed as illegitimate actors by most mainstream media and state politicians due to their status as criminals. As both Black and incarcerated, the majority of the membership was rendered doubly criminal as racial hierarchies have long associated Blackness with criminality, and therefore less than human.¹⁸⁵ Within this context, the Civics Project sought to express their humanity to the outside world to challenge these conceptualizations. During the reformulation of the Civics Project, Checo Yancey served as the organization's public relations person. According to him, they worked to demonstrate to the world that they were also concerned with the plight of others by organizing fundraising drives. "The first gift we gave to sickle cell, and muscular dystrophy and all these organizations. We wanted people to know that prisoners are humans too. So that was part of the public relations."¹⁸⁶ The Civics Project claims to humanity were crucial for them to change public perceptions about prisoners, and to justify their worthiness for freedom while focusing on changing the structures of the Louisiana penal system.

Ongoing Focus on Structural Change and Strategic Coalitions

Back at square one following Roemer's election, members of the Civics Project decided to focus on what they were trying to highlight above everything else: life sentencing. The Civics Project began by conducting a ten state study to compare Louisiana's laws to other states across the nation. Members of the Correspondence Committee sent out questionnaires to other states'

¹⁸⁴ Checo Yancey. Interview by author. January 7, 2011.

¹⁸⁵ Davis, "Race and Criminalization," 66-721

¹⁸⁶ Checo Yancy, Interview by author. January 7, 2011.

prison administrations including Texas, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Illinois, and Florida while the Legal Research Committee analyzed the responses. Soon, they discovered that Louisiana had more prisoners serving life without parole sentences than any other state despite its much smaller population than other states with life without parole such as Pennsylvania or Illinois. Particularly shocking to them was that Texas, often framed as having one of the harshest prison systems in the country, still had parole eligibility available for those sentenced to life in prison. By ascertaining the exceptional character of Louisiana's life without parole laws, the Civics Project members felt that they had identified a winnable campaign for their work.¹⁸⁷ With this information they "began using the weapons that were available to [them], and the weapons that were available were the law."¹⁸⁸ With the legal background of several members, the Civics Project went forward in brainstorming possible new legislation.

The Civics Project leadership began drafting an alternative to the current life sentencing legislation. They decided that what was important was ensuring that there be a mechanism for release available to lifers and practical lifers. However, this was easier said than done. Deciding how much time someone should serve before becoming parole eligible became a contentious issue. According to Henderson, this issue became one of the biggest fights internal to the Civics Project. Questions emerged such as

What kind of restrictions are we putting on ourselves? When do we say we are eligible to get out of this place? And that became a real struggle. Who are you to decide how long I'm going to stay inside? That went back and forth until we took a consensus of what was going on around the country.¹⁸⁹

This internal struggle highlights the issue that in order to attain freedom, members of the Civics Project were crafting legislation that reproduced the concept that people should be incarcerated

¹⁸⁷ Kenneth "Biggy" Johnston, interview by author, January 15, 2011; Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010; Floyd Webb, "Special Civics Project," *The Angolite*, January/February 1990.

¹⁸⁸ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010.

¹⁸⁹ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010.

in general, and specifically that certain convictions “required” longer sentences. For many prisoners distinctions based on convictions felt arbitrary. Checo Yancey also recalls this was a difficult moment for him, as he wanted to draft a law where he would be eligible immediately. However, he, along with other Civics Project members, was convinced to support a graduated parole eligibility proposal because it was politically viable and therefore most likely to benefit the collective whole.¹⁹⁰ To that end, they proposed a structure that determined parole eligibility based on what people’s convictions were. For example, a person serving life for first-degree murder would be eligible at twenty years, a person serving life for second-degree murder would be eligible at fifteen years, and someone serving life for aggravated kidnapping would be eligible at twelve years. Once they came to an agreement internally, they needed to gain the support of people both inside and outside if they hoped to make their legislation a reality.

After months of work, the Civics Project held a meeting to present their research findings and began to talk about the potential of new parole laws with others at Angola. In order to galvanize people across the prison, they explained the disparities between Louisiana’s sentencing laws and other states. In addition to sharing their research, Johnston stated that they planned to utilize their data to propose and argue for alternative legislation to Louisiana laws and to educate and organize outside families and friends around prison reform.¹⁹¹ Interim Warden Larry Smith remarked after the Civics Project presentation that he was proud to see the Civics Project embarking on such a project and would support their efforts. Smith concluded his speech that this movement required an attitude of “No Surrender – No Retreat.”¹⁹² With the support of the Warden, the Civics Project began planning to share their findings and platform with the broader public.

¹⁹⁰ Checo Yancy, Interview by author. January 7, 2011.

¹⁹¹ Floyd Webb, “Special Civics Project,” *The Angolite*, January/February 1990.

¹⁹² Floyd Webb, “Special Civics Project,” *The Angolite*, January/February 1990.

A few months later in March of 1990 the Civics Project unveiled their platform at the first ever penal reform symposium held at Angola. The seminar brought together a broad cross-section of attorneys, outside activists, a member of the state legislature, judges, corrections officials, and educators among others. With such leaders and media present, the symposium was a tremendous opportunity for the Civics Project to show the fallacies of the state's current law and order politics and hopefully build a shared consensus on the problems of criminal justice. At the seminar, the Civics Project shared the research they had conducted on the inequities of criminal justice in Louisiana and the state's life sentencing laws. In addition to the information compiled by the Angola Special Civics Project, a series of prisoners, corrections officials, political leaders, and academics addressed the crowd about their own perspective on the issues confronting the Louisiana penal system. Following discussion about the problems of the criminal justice system, Civics Project leaders presented their fifty-page report, "Analysis of Louisiana's Sentencing and Parole Laws and Proposed Legislative Alternatives." They outlined their proposal for graduated parole eligibility legislation, emphasizing that the goal was not to release all lifers and practical lifers, but to create a system where individuals who had rehabilitated themselves were rewarded. Hoping to sway political opinion on the issue of life without parole, the Angola Special Civics Project mailed every state legislator and other relevant public officials copies of their report.¹⁹³ Moreover, they argued that there existed "criminal menopause," a theory developed by Tulane University law professor John Turley of the Program for Older Prisoners (POPS) that once a person reached their forties, they were less likely to commit a

¹⁹³ The Associated Press, "Louisiana Inmates Offer Reform Package," *The Dallas Morning News*, March 26, 1990.

crime. Therefore, they contended, in terms of safety it was unnecessary to keep men inside Angola for their entire lives.¹⁹⁴

Additionally, the criminal justice symposium allowed for the Civics Project to connect with potential allies who would strengthen their campaign. Even with the support of academics, corrections officials, and members of the judicial system, the Civics Project still needed a state legislator to carry their legislation. In attendance at the symposium was State Representative Naomi Farve. Representing the Ninth Ward of New Orleans, Farve had felt spiritually called to focus on issues related to prisoners and incarceration since she entered office in 1986. Because of her concerns, she attended a number of meetings of the Lifers' Association where she first heard about the Civics Project's proposed legislation. Believing in the concept that people should have the opportunity for the second chance that parole eligibility provided them, she announced at the criminal justice symposium that she would carry the bill in the next legislative session to begin in April.¹⁹⁵ Representative Farve began working against conservative Louisiana legislators for the passage of the Civics' Project bill.

Not only did the Civics Project gain the support of a state legislator during the criminal justice symposium, they connected with the national prison reform organization Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants (CURE). CURE – a prison reform organization founded in Texas in 1972 by white Catholics Charlie and Pauline Sullivan – had been reaching out to prisoners at Angola for a few years. CURE leader Ray Hill attended the symposium and expressed his enthusiasm for agenda and strategy of the Civics Project.¹⁹⁶ Members of the Civics

¹⁹⁴ Flo Clarence Goodlow and Ron Wikberg, "A Nobel Effort," *The Angolite*, May/June 1990; Kenneth "Biggy" Johnston, interview by author, January 15, 2011; Norris Henderson. Interview by author; Checo Yancy, Interview by author. January 7, 2011.

¹⁹⁵ Naomi Farve. Interview by author. March 21, 2011. Clarence Goodlow and Ron Wikberg, "A Nobel Effort," *The Angolite*, May/June 1990.

¹⁹⁶ Clarence Goodlow and Ron Wikberg, "A Nobel Effort," *The Angolite*, May/June 1990.

Project strategically decided that aligning with a national organization would give them another avenue for outreach and publicity. Locally, they thought that CURE could be a formal organizational structure that would allow them to build back up their outside base of family and friends to work accountably with Civics Project leadership. To that end, Civics Project members began encouraging Civics Project members, the general Angola population, and their outside allies to join CURE. Soon, enough hundreds of men inside Angola became CURE members to make the Angola chapter the largest CURE chapter in the nation.¹⁹⁷

Around this time, several other individuals across the state became interested in creating a Louisiana CURE chapter. Directed towards the Civics Project by the national CURE leadership, these people attended Civics Project meetings. During one meeting, it became evident to various leadership that the outside CURE members did not fully grasp that the issue was not to make conditions within the Angola better, but for lifers to have the opportunity to get out of the prison all together.¹⁹⁸ The following week after one meeting, Checo Yancey remembers that they heard at Angola there was now a Louisiana CURE chapter with elected leadership headquartered in Baton Rouge.¹⁹⁹ Hearing that the free people had made the decisions about the chapter without the participation of any of the incarcerated members who represented the vast majority of the state's membership, Civics Project leadership was furious. Central to their anger and frustrations was the assumption of the outside CURE members that they understood the issues and concerns of prisoners better than incarcerated people who had already spent years researching and devising strategies for prison reform.²⁰⁰ In response, the Civics Project membership decided to

¹⁹⁷ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010; Checo Yancy, Interview by author. January 7, 2011.

¹⁹⁸ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010.

¹⁹⁹ Checo Yancy, Interview by author. January 7, 2011.

²⁰⁰ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010; Checo Yancy, Interview by author. January 7, 2011.

stop working with CURE altogether. When CURE would attempt to hold meetings and events at Angola, they had little to no turn out.²⁰¹

Still needing a formal outside organization to direct their family and friends towards and build political leverage with, the Angola Special Civics Project founded their own organization: the Louisiana Coalition in Support of Penal Reform (LCSPR). Building from their experiences with the gubernatorial election, the Civics Project supported the development of seven chapters across the state that held regular meetings outside and within Angola.²⁰² Directly accountable to incarcerated leadership, the LCSPR worked both to broaden outside organizing for prison reform, to re-organize to form an outside voting bloc, and to support the passage of the lifer parole eligibility legislation, House Bill 1709.²⁰³ To increase organizational membership and publicize the state legislation, LCSPR members would hold informational meetings in their home communities, write letters to *The Angolite* encouraging free readers to join their efforts, and explain the structural issues of the Louisiana criminal justice system to passengers on the buses between New Orleans and Baton Rouge to Angola.²⁰⁴ According to Checo Yancey, there was particular emphasis on conveying to their families and friends that they were organizing for laws and structures that would collectively benefit incarcerated people rather than specific individuals. “We had to teach them, hold up, do not make this personal. It’s not about getting Checo out. It’s not about getting Norris out. It’s not about getting Biggy out. It’s not about Wilbert. This is about

²⁰¹ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010; Checo Yancy, Interview by author. January 7, 2011; John Czere, “A Special Visit,” *The Angolite*, May/June 1992.

²⁰² Eugene Dean. Interview by author. December 31, 2010; Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010; Checo Yancy, Interview by author. January 7, 2011.

²⁰³ Eugene Dean. Interview by author. December 31, 2010; Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010; Shawntae Johnson. Interview by author. January 28, 2011. Checo Yancy, Interview by author. January 7, 2011.

²⁰⁴ Eugene Dean. Interview by author. December 31, 2010; Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010; Checo Yancy, Interview by author. January 7, 2011; Michael Glover “Call for Unity,” *The Angolite*, January/February 1991.

a whole.”²⁰⁵ The LCSPR followed the guidance of the ASCP by calling attention to the patterns of injustice of the system as a whole rather than focusing on a single incident within one person’s case.²⁰⁶ LCSPR members organized lobby days on behalf of House Bill 1709, and, with the Civics Project, coordinated phone banks to reach out to their state legislators.²⁰⁷

While the LCSPR was working to build political leverage in support of prison reform, Representative Farve was working to get the bill out of committee. Within the conservative political landscape, she was confronted by the reality that most legislators did not want to be labeled as “soft on crime” by supporting this bill. After over a year of unsuccessfully working to get the legislation to the floor, she was offered the compromise to pass amended legislation. The amended legislation would make people parole eligible after serving twenty years and reaching forty-five years of age, but only to “practical lifers” or those serving “numbered” terms such as 50, 99, or 399 years. Anyone serving a natural life sentence would be excluded from the legislation.²⁰⁸ She brought the option to the Angola Special Civics Project to decide whether or not to take the offer, although it would exclude most of the organization’s membership. Checo Yancey sums up the thought process of the Civics Project in making its decision whether or not to support the bill.

Well, selfishly we could have said no, but it wouldn’t have affected anybody. Sometimes you can be on the cutting edge of change, and it doesn’t affect you but you’re helping somebody else. Plus, it was another way for us to sell maybe our next project, maybe our next issue. The legislature is going to say ok these guys are reasonable. I can work with them, and they can work with us.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁵ Checo Yancy, Interview by author. January 7, 2011.

²⁰⁶ Annie Goings “Outcry” *The Angolite*, January/February 1993, Sound Offs.

²⁰⁷ Eugene Dean. Interview by author. December 31, 2010; Shawntae Johnson. Interview by author. January 28, 2011.

²⁰⁸ Naomi Farve. Interview by author. March 21, 2011; Kenneth “Biggy” Johnston, interview by author, January 15, 2011.

²⁰⁹ Checo Yancy, Interview by author. January 7, 2011.

For Civics Project members, they decided denying legislation that would allow anyone to get out would be against their purpose as an organization. Moreover, winning this piece of legislation, which became known as the “20/45 law,” seemed like a victory that they could build off of as they continued to press for expanded parole eligibility. Once the legislation passed the Civics Project and other incarcerated men at Angola rejoiced at their sense they could shift the political tide, and they deepened their sense of hope that further change was on the way.²¹⁰

However, this was not to be the case. The passage of the “20/45 law” became the highlight of the Angola Special Civics Project. While the Civics Project and the LCSPR continued to push for parole eligibility and organized as voting blocs around state and local elections, the political openings that had once afforded them the structures for organizing began to close. While Civics Project leadership always centralized their focus on collective struggle, they continued to work on their individual cases as well. They began individually attaining their freedom challenging their personal cases which sometimes supported by the passage of the 20/45 law. Beginning with Biggy Johnston’s release to parole in 1993, key leaders who had shaped their organization’s structure and culture began departing Angola.²¹¹ Although some leaders have continued to visit and work with the Civics Project after their release, everyone I interviewed stated there has been a lack of prisoner leadership to run the project to its former scale.²¹²

Furthermore, changes in Louisiana Correction’s administration closed previous political openings. In the 1992 gubernatorial election between Edwards and David Duke, Edwards committed to corrections officials the appointment of conservative Richard Stalder as head of

²¹⁰ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010.

²¹¹ Kenneth "Biggy" Johnston, interview by author, January 15, 2011.

²¹² Eugene Dean. Interview by author. December 31, 2010; Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010; Kenneth "Biggy" Johnston, interview by author, January 15, 2011; Checo Yancy, Interview by author. January 7, 2011.

corrections in exchange for the votes of the states' prison employees.²¹³ The era of reformist officials came to a close with direct consequences for incarcerated activists. After Burl Cain became the warden in 1995, he shut down the open press of *The Angolite* and increased restrictions on prisoner organizing.²¹⁴ Finally, over time the era of the 10-6 life sentence has been wiped from the collective memory of Louisiana prisoners. The moment of political opportunity drew to a close and the political contradictions increased without corresponding political openings. Increasingly, the men housed at Angola have only known an institution with thousands of lifers who have no expectation of release within their lifetime.

Conclusion

Although the Civics Project did not attain all of its goals, the organization serves as an important example of grassroots organizing during the era of the rise of the prison industrial complex. Incarcerated activists identified the issue of the expansion of the Louisiana system years during the 1980s and early 1990s, a time period often framed as an era of retrenchment of social movements. Rather than be repressed under the conservative law and order environment, prisoner-led organizing blossomed under a combination of political threats and opportunities. Utilizing the leadership development structures of the law library and the balanced leadership of Biggy Johnston and Norris Henderson, the Angola Special Civics Project collectively organized prisoners to articulate the structural issues of the Louisiana prison system and envision alternatives. Incarcerated activists highlighted the importance of their leadership in crafting new policies and aligned with outsiders accountable to them. Together by focusing on the ideologies and practices of “lock them up and throw away the key” politics, they contested the very logic of

²¹³ Rideau, *In the Place of Justice*, 241.

²¹⁴ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010; Rideau, *In the Place of Justice*, 242-246.

the prison system which sought to ignore and forget the thousands of men warehoused at the plantation of Angola.

CHAPTER 6: Conclusion

Since the 1980s, the carceral landscape of Louisiana has grown to proportions previously unimaginable. As of 2007, the prison population had increased 272 percent since 1982, with the addition of several new prisons and the expansion of pre-existing facilities.²¹⁵ I argue that for those of us committed to living in a world where imprisonment is not our solution to the social and economic problems of the 21st century, it is imperative for us to critically reflect on the antiprison activism that has come before us to inform our current movements.

In considering the history of the Angola Special Civics Project in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it is tempting to evaluate them based only on whether they achieved their concrete goal of ending life imprisonment. However, social movement historian Robin D.G. Kelley reminds us this narrow focus would do a disservice to their political project.

Unfortunately, too often our standards for evaluating social movements pivot around whether or not they ‘succeeded’ on realizing their visions rather than on the merits or power of the visions themselves. By such a measure, virtually every radical movement failed because the basic power relations they sought to change remain pretty much intact. And yet it is precisely these alternative visions and dreams that inspire new generations to continue to struggle for change.²¹⁶

This is not to say that it does not matter whether or not a movement attains its material goals. By attaining such goals, political activists are making changes towards dismantling systems of oppression and creating a more just society. Activists’ goals matter, but so does their process. If we focus only on the “end result” of social movements, we find ourselves replicating the logics of capitalism that influence us to prioritize products at the expense of all else. Moreover, attention to process allows us to assess the intangible differences social movements make such as

²¹⁵ Tim Morris, "Louisiana's Incarceration Rate Is No. 1 in Nation," *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), March 2, 2009, accessed April 20, 2011, http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2009/03/louisianas_incarceration_rate.html.

²¹⁶ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: the Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), ix.

articulating previously ignored social and economic problems, the building of networks that can be called upon in future struggles, and the reclamation of subaltern identities. Additionally, organizers from various movement formations have long called for the importance of prefigurative politics in our movements arguing for the need to model the structures and social relationships activists are striving for within present organizing. Following this framework, I contend the importance of considering how the relationships built within movement organizations and spaces reflect new ways for people to build together that reflect a collective humanity rather than hierarchical power relations.

In evaluating the Civics Project, lessons are to be learned from a variety of angles. Through studying the history of the Angola Special Civics Project, we discover not only the historical circumstances that created an opportunity for the Civics Project, but also how people took advantage of the moment to envision a different criminal justice system. Both their successes and challenges provide important insight for current antiprison movements.

Additionally, research into the Angola Special Civics Project illustrates how much more there is to be studied and written about antiprison activism and Louisiana incarceration. Potential sites of new research include: the impacts of *The Angolite* on Louisiana criminal justice policy, the internalization of criminality discourses by incarcerated people, other Southern antiprison movements, the relationship between the rise of incarceration in Louisiana and urban neoliberal politics, and the emergence of other antiprison movements during the era of the rise of the prison industrial complex. This research can inform scholars and activists alike in challenging the prison system.

Outcomes of the Angola Special Civics Project

The Angola Special Civics Project provides important lessons for today's organizing. Their history demonstrates the impact that national, state, and local conditions can have on our local political work. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, national politicians looking for a new avenue to contain Black and Third World activists and to respond to growing economic crises, developed a new law and order politics invested in the expansion of the US prison system. Deeply influenced by national politics, the Louisiana legislature passed a series of laws aimed at increasing prison sentences. In addition, Republican governors committed to "tough on crime" policies put an unofficial moratorium on clemency closing another opportunity for prisoners' release. However, during this same era the mismanagement of the Louisiana penal system publicized through prisoners' protests led to federal intervention, which resulted in the appointment of reformist corrections officials. Committed to a belief in rehabilitation, a generation of prison administrators created an environment at Angola that allowed for prisoners to self-organize themselves in response to the crises of life in prison. In the case of the Civics Project the political threat of dying behind bars, combined dialectically with both political openings and political contractions, afforded the political opportunity of a climate conducive to political organizing. While these structures did not determine that the prisoners would organize, it created an encouraging environment.

One success of the Civics Project was its demonstration of the value of incarcerated leadership in movements for prison reform. Confronted with the reality of life with no hope for release, incarcerated activists at Angola were pushed to collectively organize for their freedom. Motivated by own collective self-interest, they focused on finding ways not to change the conditions of confinement, a priority of outside advocates like CURE, but the circumstances of

their incarceration. Founding the Angola Special Civics Project, these men began identifying the structural forces that were impacting their inability to have an opportunity for release. Years before the phrase the “prison industrial complex” entered into activist or academic discourses, the Civics Project began outlining the interconnected relationships between law and order politics, the expansion of the Louisiana prison system, the disproportionate incarceration of people of color, and the economics of prisons. By centering their own experiential knowledge, they were able to clearly identify the issues they were confronted with which guided them to the targets of their organizing. In particular, they identified the role that elected officials played in making policy decisions, which had material effects on their lives. Following that identification, they focused on organizing around political elections and later changing the actual laws of the Louisiana legislature.

While committed to incarcerated leadership, the Angola Special Civics Project also recognized the need for free people to be involved in their struggles. Civics Project leaders recognized that as prisoners they were of little concern to politicians or broader society that had written them off as simply criminals. With this in mind, they sought to build an outside coalition with families and friends committed to their release. In doing so they argued for the necessity of incarcerated leadership as in the words of Norris Henderson, “you don’t know the wants, needs, and desires [of prisoners] better than me.”²¹⁷ At their strongest, outside supporters worked in directly accountable ways to the men inside Angola, following their leadership while they organized voting blocs, lobbied legislatures, and educated their communities about the need for prison reform. Even when Representative Naomi Farve proposed Civics Project parole eligibility legislation, she did not accept an amendment without the approval of the Civics Project because the men inside were to be the ones directly impacted by the legislation. Through accountable

²¹⁷ Norris Henderson. Interview by author. December 14, 2010.

relationships, the Angola Special Civics Project was able to achieve coalitions between incarcerated activists and free people.

Moreover, members of the Civics Project also were successful in contesting the dehumanization of themselves and their fellow prisoners. Throughout their organizing activists of the Civics Project asserted that their humanity be recognized. They argued that their right to life outside the walls of Angola was not based on whether they were guilty or innocent, but that everyone regardless of their conviction should have the opportunity for release. In addition, by building coalitions with outside allies and holding events behind the prison walls, incarcerated activists contested the penal system's project of isolating the lives of prisoners from others in the state. In doing so, the Angola Special Civics Project challenged the very public forgetting of prisoners that had contributed to scores of people dying unnoticed at Angola.

Additionally, the Angola Special Civics Project organizing had concrete impacts on the Louisiana criminal justice system even as the prison industrial complex became more entrenched throughout the 1990s. The Civics Project and the LCSPPR publicizing the issues of prison reform contributed to social justice activists across the state incorporating an analysis of the prison industrial complex into their organizing and at times even spawning new political formations.²¹⁸ Their passage of the 20/45 law created new mechanisms for release that directly impacted the lives of countless people incarcerated throughout the state. Moreover, the passage of the 20/45 law had the unintended consequence of creating a loophole that permitted for governors to commute prisoners' life sentences to lengthy numbered terms, allowing for them to appear tough on crime while actually making prisoners parole eligible. It was this very process that allotted for Checo Yancey's freedom.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ Ted Quant. Interview by author. February 9, 2011.

²¹⁹ Yancey, Checo. Interview by author. January 7, 2011.

Furthermore, the achievements of the Angola Special Civics Project have extended into the current moment. Their investment in the leadership of incarcerated activists at Angola continues to have impact. Since getting out, former Civics Project leaders have continued to work for prison reform. Upon Norris Henderson's release in 2003, he founded the New Orleans based organization Voice of the Ex-Offender (VOTE) to organize formerly incarcerated people as an outgrowth of the electoral work of the Civics Project.²²⁰ Building off his relationships from the Civics Project, Biggy Johnston has worked with VOTE to teach a paralegal class similar to his work during the early days of the law library, and former Civics Project member Eugene Dean is now a member of VOTE.²²¹ North of New Orleans in Baton Rouge, Checo Yancey who once shunned CURE is now the president of the Louisiana chapter. After their realization that they could not get anything accomplished without Civics Project leaders, the Louisiana CURE chapter learned the importance of having currently and formerly incarcerated people involved in their project.²²² These men attribute their current leadership abilities to the experience, skills, and training of the Angola Special Civics Project. They continue to bring their experiential knowledge and serve as leader for movements against prisons and policing.

Despite these varied achievements, the Angola Special Civics Project was confined by outside limitations. The law and order politics within Louisiana and the nation-at-large undercut their networks of organization and solidarity in trying to create an end of life without parole. Even with the support of Representative Naomi Farve, the conservative climate within the Louisiana legislature precluded their ability to pass the reforms to the extent they were seeking. Whether or not any other legislators could be persuaded to shift their personal politics, the

²²⁰ Henderson, Norris. Interview by author. December 14, 2010.

²²¹ Johnston, Kenneth "Biggy" Interview by author. January 15, 2011; Dean, Eugene. Interview by author. December 31, 2010.

²²² Yancey, Checo. Interview by author. January 7, 2011.

deepening acceptance of mass incarceration as *the* solution to public safety by people across the state ensured that Representative Farve remained in the minority speaking out for the rights of incarcerated people. Despite their accomplishments in prisoner organizing, the solidifying political consensus proved too strong for the Civics Project to challenge at the necessary scale.

The Civics Project also experienced its own internal limitations. While they argued for structural changes to the criminal justice system, they were also influenced by law and order discourses. Within their focus on attaining parole eligibility for people serving life sentences, while everyone should have an opportunity for parole they made clear that not everyone was deserving of parole. While this may have been viewed as strategically necessary in a heightened tough on crime political climate, it also reified the necessity of incarceration, even if only for some. Even antiprison activists have been socialized via similar frameworks regarding crime and incarceration. By classifying some people as deserving of parole and others not, the Angola Special Civics Project contributed to the notion that prisons are necessary institutions for some amorphous grouping of criminal individuals. Moreover, by using a framework of “criminal menopause” in their organizing, they implied that criminality was an inherent characteristic based on age, rather than a social construction created by economic and social structures. This framework reduced the visibility of the structural forces at play that compel people to commit crimes, or that someone should have been convicted in the first place. The internalization of these logics even by individuals deeply committed to transforming the prison system illustrates how strongly law and order politics have infiltrated people’s consciousness in the last several decades.

Towards Abolitionist Reforms

Nevertheless, the organizations, ideologies, and strategies of our social movements always have room to change and grow. The power of the Angola Special Civics Project lay with its vision, strategies, and tactics developed by those who had no other choice but to challenge the prison system. Returning to the initial question of how do antiprison activists center the goal of prison abolition while organizing for reforms, the Angola Special Civics Project illustrates some components of an abolitionist strategy.

As mentioned at the beginning of the thesis, prison abolitionists have articulated abolition as a three-part process of shrinking the prison system through deincarceration, challenging societal structures that funnel communities into prisons, and building alternative systems to the prison industrial complex. Even though Civics Project members did not conceive of themselves or their project as abolitions, their organizing falls within the spectrum of abolitionist reform strategy.

From the beginning, incarcerated activists asserted that the prison is a political institution structured by race and class. This analysis led them to see the links between the growing prison system and the lack of decent education, healthcare, housing, and other social services for working class communities of color. Even during their campaign for Edwin Edwards, they argued for the necessity of resourcing social services if the public truly was interested in getting to the root issues of crime. Moreover, the work of the Civics Project lay squarely within a collective deincarceration strategy. Their aim was always to get men out of Angola, rather than making the conditions more comfortable for men to accept their incarceration. Their electoral campaigns, political education projects, and coalition building was all directed towards the goal of expanding parole eligibility and pushing for reduced sentencing policies.

Although the Angola Special Civics Project did not particularly engage in the project of envisioning or building alternatives to incarceration, this should not overshadow the organizing they did in the spirit of abolitionist reforms. We should remember that the Civics Project emerged out of the historical moment of the late 1980s—during a time most social justice activists had to yet to embrace the work of antiprison organizing. Instead, we should see the Angola Special Civics Project in the forefront of activists in the process of developing a politicized analysis of incarceration and of the pitfalls of traditional reform organizing. In fact, their assertion of the humanity of incarcerated peoples harkens back to the abolitionist organizers of the 1800s. Those activists centered much of their argument for the abolition of slavery on humanity of slaves, and that it was actually the creation of slavery that was dehumanizing to all. Let the Angola Special Civics Project impel us not only to contest the dehumanization of those behind bars, but to remind us that such work is necessary for us reclaim our own collective humanity that has been damaged by the violence of incarceration.

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